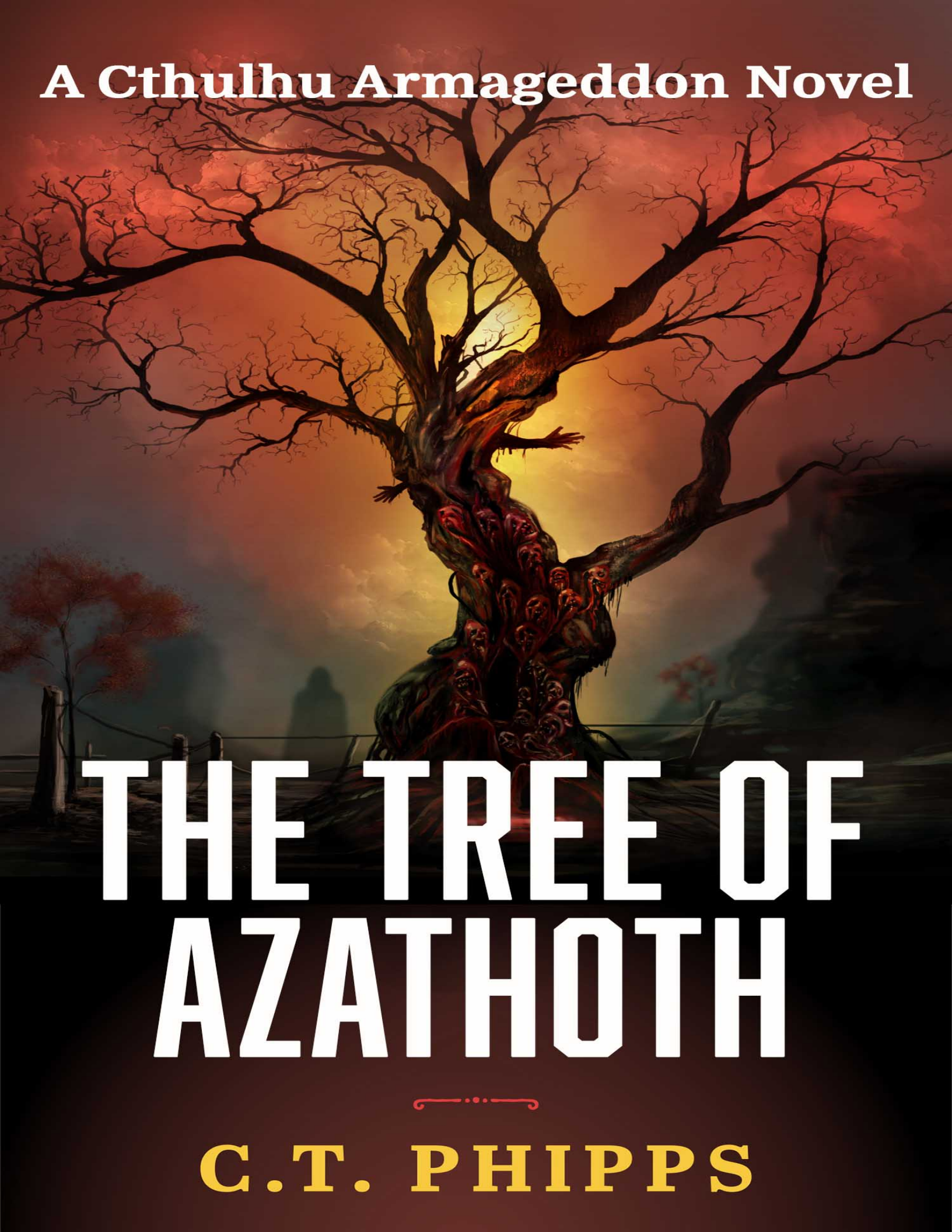
A Cthulhu Armageddon Novel



THE TREE OF AZATHOTH

C.T. PHIPPS

THE TREE OF AZATHOTH

The Cthulhu Armageddon Series, Book Three

By C. T. Phipps

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C. T. Phipps is a lifelong student of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. An avid tabletop gamer, he discovered this passion led him to write and turned him into a lifelong geek. He is a regular blogger and also a reviewer for The Bookie Monster.

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Foreword

By C. T. Phipps

John Henry Booth lives rent free in my head.

It's interesting that *Cthulhu Armageddon* was never meant to be more than a standalone book, but I couldn't help but write the sequel, *The Tower of Zhaal*, because I had more stories to tell with the character. The apocalyptic wasteland hero who, unfortunately for him, was doomed to become a monster as the alien blood in his veins tore away his humanity. In the end, there was never an ending other than eventually succumbing to the beast within.

Except, he survived.

Quite against my will, John Henry Booth would appear in novellas in the *Tales of the Al-Azif*, *Tales of Yog-Sothoth*, and *Tales of Nyarlathotep* anthologies. A version of him would show up in *The Future of Supervillainy*, apparently escaping from his own tragic ending to a universe more suited to a Lovecraftian superhero, if such a creature can be said to exist. He even has a doppelganger that showed up in the Andrew Doran series by Matthew Davenport according to said figure.

This is annoying because there's not meant to be a continuing series of stories in cosmic horror universes. The nature of cosmic horror is the universe is meaningless—if not actively malevolent—and there's only a slow slide into oblivion awaiting us. The continuing adventures of someone who manages to escape that fate again and again can only undermine that position.

That was when I realized *that is John's thing*, though. What fundamentally has always separated the *Cthulhu Armageddon* series from other cosmic horror works is that John is *aware* that the universe is pointless and malevolently hostile. He lives in a post-apocalypse hellscape. Every day he chooses to get up is a victory because his existence is blood on his teeth, a curse on his tongue, and a pair of pistols in his hands.

I should have figured it out earlier, but John Henry Booth is Conan the Barbarian's distant descendant, perhaps literally since 10,000 years means that the Cimmerian's DNA has probably infected everyone at some point. I wasn't writing pulp horror where our protagonist is destined to die because they read the wrong pulp *fantasy*. I was as much inspired by Titus Crow and

Roland Deschain as Conan and those people are monster slayers of a peculiar sort.

So, I decided to write a detective novel. Why a detective novel? I suppose it's because John has survived enough Westerns that it's time to switch genres. Either way, pulpy noir detective fiction is something I wanted to see done right in a post-apocalypse setting.

John has successfully evaded all my traps to kill him in much the same way that Sherlock Holmes survived Reichenbach Falls. I may yet someday doom our protagonist, but now I must write a noir mystery taking place in the Twilight of the World. I fully intend to make John Henry Booth pay for this affrontery, but he'll continue living as long as I make him suffer for it.

Bwhahaha.

Chapter One

I dumped the body of the murderer into the center of the leather and fur tent that I'd dragged him. He was already starting to stink from three days in the desert heat despite my best efforts to preserve him so that there could be no doubting of his identity. Mind you, there was a decent chance the man I dumped the body in front of might want my death far more than that of the one I had killed.

"You killed Liberty Jones," Mister Death said, now an old and weathered man. He was once six feet in height and built like an Olympian, but the years had weathered him down to a skeleton. He still had his long silver hair, but his face was wrinkled like a raisin, and he no longer wore his characteristic eyepatch, simply leaving his missing eye for all the world to see. Today, he was wrapped up in blankets and looked close to his name.

Mister Death was the father of Katryn, a woman who had once claimed me as both a slave as well as husband, only for me to eventually kill her after she succumbed to the monster within her. They were both Dunwych tribals and creatures of both the Wasteland and civilization. Indeed, the Dunwych Elder before me was now the leader of their nation—or at least what I was able to still find of it. It pained me to see the once-powerful sorcerer and warrior in such a reduced state.

"Yes," I said.

Liberty Jones was a peculiar sort of man for me to hunt as he wielded no magic, worshiped no gods, and seemed as human as any other survivor of that dying dwindling race I could no longer call my own. He was, however, a killer of children. Somehow, the former New Arkham refugee had learned enough skill to slip in and out of Dunwych communities after doing his best to slit the throats of their children one after the other. I'd heard that he'd been responsible for fourteen deaths and all of their trackers had been unable to bring him low.

I was no friend to the Dunwych, hating my brief period of slavery underneath them and their pagan worship of the Great Old Ones who had destroyed our world. I wasn't a great believer in "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em". Not even the fact that I'd long since discovered I was not human myself had changed my desire to spit in their many eyes to simply let them know that I was alive, however long that may be. Still, I hated any creature

that would prey upon the few hopes for the once-vast human race. I also needed a favor and figured this was the one gift I might give to achieve it.

The interior of the ceremonial tent was sparse, with a fire pit, a few bookshelves containing ratty tattered old yellow volumes, a trunk in the corner, and a crude chemistry set that was laid out on a cloth mat for some sort of experiment. There were several clay vases and a few glass bottles filled with a variety of liquids and powders beside it. Along the sides of the tent were hung blankets showing strange sigils and patterns that had meanings lost to me or, perhaps, simply had always been meant to look pretty and nothing more.

It was a far cry from the once great lodges of the Dunwych that I had passed by on eight-legged horseback. Most of the Dunwych's towns and cities were abandoned or simply nonexistent now. It had taken me two of the three days I'd travelled since killing Liberty Jones to track this nomadic pack of survivors down. It was simply bad luck that Mister Death was the man in charge of them, bad luck or providence.

"You haven't changed much in twenty years," Mister Death said, pulling out a long glass tube and rubbing its interior in a smoke box of some kind before lighting the glass tube's tip with the edge of his fingers. Such casual use of magic was incredibly foolhardy but, I suppose, so was living in this depraved fallen world. What was the worst that could happen? Monsters appear? Monsters were everywhere and getting worse.

"Age will not be what kills me," I said, looking identical to the way I'd appeared in prior decades. Indeed, I might have looked a little bit younger as I had refined the process of shapeshifting. I had grown more comfortable with my inhuman nature, but my image was that of a black man in his forties, not the alien twisted thing that my ancestors had been. I may not be human by birth, but I was by choice, no matter what the Crawling Chaos said. Right now, I was dressed in a tattered Stetson, leathers, and a heavy coat for the burning desert that seemed to swallow more of the grasslands every day.

"Yes, you are the last Kastro'vaal," Mister Death said, sucking in the smoke produced by his strange smoking implement. He blew it out to one side, and it filled the room with an unearthly but not altogether unpleasant smell.

"Perhaps," I said, thinking of my children.

The Kastro'vaal had been an alien shapeshifting race akin to a shoggoth, possibly even related if somehow the Elder Things had managed to acquire some of them to experiment on from distant dimensions. They had the peculiar ability to breed with any other species and lay their offspring within them, birthing children that would eventually come into their own decades or centuries later.

One of the Great Old Ones, albeit not one who had ever visited Earth, had wiped them out so completely to make sure they'd never even existed in this timeline. Nyarlathotep, the only alien thing approaching godhood who had any interest in lesser beings, had saved my father to breed more of his kind—though I wasn't sure that was our proper relationship. The Crawling Chaos was a liar after all, and there were signs that I was more akin to a reincarnation. Other times, I wondered if I'd been turned into a monster rather than born one. A whim of a mad god or a prank was entirely in keeping with what I knew of the Dark One.

I'd never been able to find my children, Gabriel and Anita, after I'd been separated from them. I wanted to warn them about their unholy blood and that it might overtake them. If time and history proved accurate, they should have found out years ago. A part of me hoped they never would and had either died or would die ignorant of their inhuman heritage.

"Katryn was one of your kind or something similar," Mister Death said, seemingly uninterested in Liberty Jones. That did not bode well for our future dealings.

"Yes," I admitted. "But she didn't survive the change, at least not in personality. She became as the Great Old Ones: wild, free, and killing with impunity. Also, totally inhuman."

"I would argue killing with impunity is a good sign of humanity," Mister Death replied. "Where is that redheaded harlot you used to travel with?"

I'd have taken objection to Mercury being described as that, but she'd actually owned a brothel for a decade. "She left me."

We'd found one another after the destruction of New Ulthar, Mercury having gotten our daughter Jackie and her baby free, but our parting had followed shortly thereafter. I tried not to think about how the doom that had come to New Ulthar had been Mercury's doing to save my life, but love made us all monsters in the end.

"Ah," Mister Death said. "She could no longer stand sharing a bed with a monster?"

In truth, she'd gotten more comfortable with that than I ever had. "She'd grown more uncomfortable with the fact she was getting older while I was staying the same age. I told her I would be beside her through thick and thin, richer or poorer, and until the bitter end. That just pissed her off."

"Ha!" Mister Death smirked. "Women."

"Mercury wanted to live forever as well and is seeking that in the Wasteland or other dimensions," I replied. "I don't know if I ever will see her again or if I'd even recognize her if I did."

I should have abandoned her for destroying New Ulthar but, in the end, I didn't have the capacity to judge mortals anymore. The Wasteland had carved away humanity's morality until only survival remained—survival and obsession with what was yours.

"And the ghoul child?" Mister Death asked.

I was getting really tired of him prying into my personal life.

"Jackie has gone off to live with her people, the change overcame her last year. She took her child, Baby John, with her. The ghouls have retreated to caverns not of this world."

"That is the fate of the Dunwych." Mister Death nodded. "We have begun the exodus."

"The exodus?" I asked.

"It means exit," Mister Death condescended.

"I know what it fucking means," I muttered, half wondering if I should just gun the old man down then and there. If he was still human enough to be killed, I'd have to slaughter all of the Dunwych tribals outside, though. It might have been worth it. Especially since I'd done worse over the past few decades.

"Then why ask?" Mister Death said, laughing.

I stared at him.

"You are no fun, John," Mister Death replied. "This world is on its last hours, a few decades at most, and I have no intention of leaving my race to the tender mercies of what comes next. The Tree spoke that we must flee to the Dreamlands."

I had no idea who this Tree was. The possibility of an escape intrigued me, though. "The Dreamlands?"

"A place you and I are both familiar with," Mister Death replied. "Great dreamers like Randolph Carter, Abdul Al-hazred, Titus the Crow, Keziah Mason, and others have created safe pockets within that may yet become

their own fantastic realms. Certainly, places less hostile than this dead doomed place."

"Is living in a dream different from death?" I asked. "Especially if all dreamers must eventually wake?"

"Who says you have to awaken?" Mister Death replied enigmatically.

"You can't eat, or drink dreams, and men die without either," I said.

"It is what it is," Mister Death shrugged. "Why have you come here to me, if not for an escape?"

He knew why I was here, somehow, without me saying so.

"I have nowhere else to go," I muttered.

Mister Death laughed, his mockery coming straight from the heart. "Oh, that is delicious."

I was now certain I would end up killing him.

"For years I had a home, a strange and peaceful village that accepted the freaks and abominations alongside the precious few normal humans left. I was its protector and loved it as it loved me."

"Sounds dreadful," Mister Death replied. "What happened to it? What monster did you fail to stop that ended your tiny kingdom?"

"Does it matter?" I asked, remembering the army of Sporemen that had descended on us.

"No. A shame for the New Ulthar people had many cats among them," Mister Death said. "Cats are far smarter than their slaves. They know when to run. Very well, John Henry Booth, I will help you."

"I admit, I had not expected that," I said, sucking in my breath. "Thank you."

Mister Death's laughter was uproarious and filled the tent with the sound of a deep, loathsome mockery that perhaps would be a man's final chuckle.

"Oh, you poor fool. Do not thank me. I do this from a place of pure hatred."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"I despise you," Mister Death said, all mirth leaving his body. "Katryn was meant to be the salvation of our people, she who would lead us all to become immortal and able to abandon this world as gods rather than beggars. But, more than that, I admit that I loved her as a father and nothing that I have experienced since that day has been anything but ashes in my mouth or pain in my soul."

"Then why?" I asked.

Mister Death stared. “There is a man who hates you more than me. A man who is determined to make your every day—of which I hope you have many more than this universe has left—into one of abject misery.”

“Who?” I asked, wondering who this mysterious enemy might be. It would at least give me a focus for my emptiness and despair.

“You,” Mister Death replied, turning my hope on itself. “There is nothing more pathetic than the wolf who wishes to be the rabbit.”

I had no response.

Mister Death closed his eyes then took one last puff off his glass tube. “The Tree will guide you to a new destination: a dream, a parallel universe, or perhaps another world where rabbits walk as men while humans are slaughtered for food. It does not matter, only that you will not be what you cannot escape being.”

“Alone,” I replied.

Mister Death nodded, apparently accepting that I knew what sort of self-inflicted hell I had subjected myself to every day that I chose to live on as a monster. I had tried killing myself, healing myself, living with myself, and accepting myself along with everything in between. None of it had worked and I was forced instead to exist in a half-state that would never be fully reconciled. If I was human, I would have long since died and been washed away by the sands of time like the rest of humanity on my Earth.

If I had been a pure Kastro’vaal, well, I would still be a miserable hate-filled creature because they were a communal people. Short of assembling a harem and breeding a new race, there was nothing to fix my loneliness and the Earth was full of creatures infinitely more dangerous than myself. The Kastro’vaal were a far more powerful people than humanity, but it was the difference between a house cat and a mouse in a world filled with dragons.

“I shall prepare you the potion,” Mister Death replied, climbing to his feet. “You’ll have to trust me that it is not poisoned on the basis of not wishing to cut short your misery.”

“I believe you,” I replied, annoyed that he was continuing this song and dance. “Who is this Tree and why should I care?”

Mister Death tottered over to his chemistry set and began working at it. “The Tree is our attempt to make a god when we realized that the ones that we sought to propagate could not be persuaded to honor us. Ants worshiping a human do not gain any reprieve from the boot.”

“In the face of an uncaring amoral universe, you decided to make yourself a god?” I asked.

“You act as if it is insane,” Mister Death said.

“Your words,” I replied.

“In a ceremony devoted to the raw reaction at the heart of the galaxy, Azathoth’s seed, we severed the heads of a dozen tribal elders and placed them together around a sapling that we poured the blood and other fluids of our tribe onto,” Mister Death said. “The resultant being was a surpassingly powerful dreamer who gained knowledge of all its selves’ prior lives as well as future ones. Its roots and branches stretched between this world and many others.”

“It sounds like a great success,” I replied.

Actually, it sounded monstrous, but I had grown a thicker skin regarding the abominations of humanity. Magic was the substance of dreams and will combined, yet it seemed everything done with it was merely one unrelenting horror after another. Of course, given what other accomplishments man had made, perhaps atrocity was the height of their collective cultural achievement. Humans were the only race that could be considered evil because they were the one species that reveled in the agony of their own kind. I didn’t know how true it was, the Elder Things might tear each other apart in their spare time, but it certainly felt true.

“It was a miserable failure,” Mister Death spoke, stirring a noxious looking brew in a beaker. “The Tree gave prophecies that drove men mad, advice that brought about nothing but disaster, and seemed to herald misfortune with its very presence. Men have long believed knowledge and wisdom would bring benevolence, but it seems the opposite is true. A being that truly sees reality for its true self can only be filled with a loathing and disgust that transcends time.”

“And you want me to speak with this creature,” I said, dryly.

“I believe it will cause you great sorrow,” Mister Death replied, handing me the potion. “But you will seek it out because the only thing worse is for you is to be left as the last human-thinking man on this world when our race goes extinct.”

I took the potion from him. “How do we know this will work? I’m not exactly a normal man.”

“It is only a medium,” Mister Death replied. “The true magic will involve other vectors.”

I nodded and drank deeply of the vile brew, feeling it burn against my throat as it went down. The taste was indescribably vile and caused me to retch once I finished.

Coughing, I looked up, “What now?”

Mister Death pulled out a curved knife from within the folds of his robes. “I make the sacrifice.”

The old Dunwych slit his own throat and a massive black void poured out to consume me.

I didn’t even get the chance to scream.

Chapter Two

Mister Death killing himself to cast a curse upon me was, honestly speaking, not that surprising. When faced with the existential threat of human extinction, we all reacted in different ways. Death became a welcome respite from continued existence, and it was all too easy to sacrifice oneself for revenge. The gods, real or otherwise, knew that I had been willing to give my life up to get revenge on Alan Ward.

I'd just survived.

Lucky me.

When I'd come to Mister Death's tent, I'd given myself even odds on being forced to kill him or him killing me, with only a small chance that he'd help me find some way out of this meaningless existence I'd found myself trapped in. I'd honestly thought the potion would be poisoned over anything else, but he'd certainly shown the commitment necessary to strike me down.

Except, if death was claiming me, it was not the merciful oblivion I'd hoped it would be, either the death of personality or transformation into something that no longer suffered from the moroseness of human despair.

No, instead, I found myself falling through my own memories as if I were witnessing a movie displaying my life. I saw other elements of my past pass across my consciousness as something happened that I didn't comprehend. I witnessed the final fateful mission of Gamma Squadron, our ranks decimated by hordes of Reanimated. I remembered the hideous onslaught of a shoggoth upon me with only two enchanted revolvers holding it back. I observed the destruction of New Arkham by a Cthulhuoid Star Spawn that was of the same substance but not grandeur as its ancestor.

Finally, I was able to start pulling myself together from where I had spread my essence across a thousand—no, a million—different points of spacetime. If I had been a smarter man, I might have brought back some great insight into the nature of the cosmos as well as consciousness.

Indeed, for what I experienced, I might say that a man exists as not a single piece of string with a beginning and end, but as part of a woven ball of countless infinite strands. My people—when I acknowledged they weren't human—worshiped Yog-Sothoth. The thing which existed in

between everyone and everything at all points. A being which was omniscient, omnipotent, apart, and withdrawn all at once.

God.

The Devil.

The Key and the Gate.

Or as close to such a being as had been confirmed existed. It was in that moment that I realized—before immediately forcing such thoughts from my mind—that we were all simply tidbits of quantum matter making up its body. As cells made up the human (and alien) bodies, so did planets and galaxies form the basis for the Being Above, Between, Below, and Beyond.

I was not a capable practitioner of magic, only able to do the most dull and basic rituals by rote repetition, but this being was a creature that could manipulate such things by raw thought. Dreaming was the source of all magic in the universe, an ability to recognize the illusionary nature of the cosmos and turn it into something else. Yet, even as I saw the secret to recreate the universe, it drifted out of my mind like water through the space between my fingers.

There were also scenes from the distant past of other lives as well as future encounters with other worlds and people who I had never met. Yet, it was the human moments that drew me in. Perhaps it was an absurdity of life that the only way to deal with its meaninglessness was to assign a meaning to the most mundane of acts. The creation of a single life no more than a finite mote of dust in a vast terrible universe where it was less than a grain of sand in a desert stretching forth across infinity.

But I watched nevertheless.

I was there, holding my newborn child Gabriel, in a dirty hospital room in New Arkham. It was twenty years in the past. Martha, my wife, was sleeping off the drugs they'd given her as I cherished their existence. I had no idea I was a monster.

Nearby, in one of the waiting rooms, was my daughter Anita. She was not much older than Gabriel and was being looked after by one of her aunts. My marriage to Martha had been arranged by the state, but I'd tried to make it a happy one. It hadn't always succeeded but I was proud to be a father for the second time.

"We'll have to test them both," Doctor David Wilson said. He was a tall, black-bearded man in a blood-splattered smock, with a surgical mask over his face. The man was repulsive in a way I couldn't quite put into words and

there were many rumors about his practices which were less than wholesome.

I had never questioned Doctor Wilson's handling of the births in New Arkham, but he was the man who determined which couples got to breed and which did not. Each child was examined by them, and it was only now, with my second child being born under difficult circumstances that I began to realize the full implications of that. The Council of Leaders could sidestep the man's decisions—he answered to them after all—but I was just a lowly soldier while my wife deferred to the system in all things.

"Test him?" I asked. "Is he sick?"

"No, no, not that. For psychic abilities," Doctor Wilson said. "Martha is possessed of amazing gifts we hope she will have passed down. There's also the potential for other kinds of mutation."

"Other kinds of mutation?" I asked, a slight edge entering my voice.

"The bad kind. Yes, you have been in the Wastelands a great deal," Doctor Wilson said, pausing. "If they have any deformities or genetic damage then we'll have to euthanize the product. We can't potentially damage future generations by letting them breed. Even sterilization isn't enough. Each mutant takes up resources which might better go to a proper breedable child of the American Remnant."

My eyes narrowed and I opened my mouth before closing it. "Can we do the testing in private?"

"Of course," Doctor Wilson misread my reticence as embarrassment. "I understand how you wouldn't want a negative result reflecting poorly on you. I appreciate all that you and your Rangers do for us. Many a child have been reported as stillborn in these situations. It will, however, require a consideration."

"Of course." I was prepared to slit his throat.

It didn't prove necessary. Gabriel registered as having even stronger abilities than his mother according to the arcane equipment set up by Doctor Alan Ward and the Arcane Studies division. Even if he had been horribly mutated, they would have let him live to use as a weapon. It thus wasn't my problem and I left Doctor Wilson to his work—right up until a thirteen-year-old girl stabbed him in the throat a month later. The reason? I have not the slightest idea.

I felt these events happening again, simultaneously, with my present even as I was also a part of the future. Eyes of Yog-Sothoth, like their god,

existed both in the dimensions of space-time and outside them.

Anita looked up at me, a ten-year-old girl wearing her Junior Ranger beret.

"*I don't see why you don't want me to become a soldier like you, Dad.*"

My family of four lived in luxurious quarters for the city-state: two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a living room in a small metal house. The carpet was stained, the furniture salvaged from ruins, and the water only worked half the time, but they were better conditions than most. One thing we'd never been able to get rid of was the strange scent of smoke that clung to everything. There was also the fact—which I never revealed to anyone else—that my reflection sometimes didn't move with me.

I stared down at her.

"*It's my hope you'll stay here in New Arkham where it's safe.*"

Anita looked up into my eyes. "Is there anywhere that's safe, Dad?"

I looked over to my son, Gabriel, who stared at the patterns in the wallpaper for things that only he could see. He was a strange child and touched in the head. Only the fact he had inherited his mother's psychic abilities kept him from being "disciplined."

"*No, but we must ever work to make such places so,*" *I said, putting my hands on her shoulders. "Humanity is a precious thing that must be cultivated like a hothouse flower. Because once it is gone, it is a darker and more terrible universe that replaces it.*"

"*Is humanity in the blood, in the brain, in the soul, or in the ideas?*" *My son pulled out a piece of red chalk and started making spirals on the wall.*

"*Excuse me?*" *I asked, looking over at him.*

"*You're dreaming, Dad.*"

"Ah!" I screamed, awakening from a nightmare-ridden sleep. I was covered in sweat and my body felt weaker and more fragile than it had in years, as if I'd been drained of blood before left to bake in the desert. I was lying on top of a rectangular wooden object and surrounded by dirt with dim sunlight leaking through the sky onto me. It took a second for me to realize I was no longer hallucinating or experiencing my strange vision from before, but once more dwelling among the living. Either that or the afterlife was a more physical, concrete place than any of the priests or poets had speculated. Looking around my surroundings, I noted I was in a hole dug six feet deep and saw worms wiggling around in the dirt around me. "Where the fuck am I?"

It took a second for me to process my location as it had been a long time since the dead had been buried in proper tombs to honor them. Mostly, we took the bodies out to be incinerated lest they rise or become havens for something foul from beyond. Still, it was a moment too long to realize I was in old-fashioned, Pre-Rising grave and lying on top of a wooden coffin of exceptionally high quality.

Strange as it may strike you, I was less disturbed by being in someone's freshly dug open grave, and more by the quality of the ground beside me. I reached out with my hand and ran my fingertips on the edge, rubbing the fertile earth between them. There were roots as well as worms among the soil particulates. It was alive and untainted, something I had only seen in a few miraculous valleys since my first days as an explorer of the Wasteland. In its own way, damp clean dirt was rarer than monsters from another world.

Putting aside my brief fascination, I stood up on top of the coffin lid and jumped my way out of the hole I'd found myself in. It was a bit more a strain than I expected, and I attributed that to whatever peculiar rabbit hole I'd found myself falling through. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, I had gone down never once considering how in the world I was to get out again.

The sight that greeted me upon my rise into the world could not have been stranger than if I had found myself indeed in the fictional world of Lewis Carroll. My eyes adjusted to the light of the sun in the overcast day instead of the harsh desert, and I saw a large cemetery full of statues both fair as well as foul. Several acres of marble and black stone monuments in grassy, wet fields of a kind no one would waste honoring the dead when food was a far more precious resource. A large pile of dirt, commensurate to the size of the hole I'd just escaped, was on the other side of the grave.

It was not the graves, the pile of dirt, or their shared location that caught my attention, though, but what lay beyond the stone wall that surrounded this place. It was buildings. Lots and lots of buildings. Not just any buildings, but huge concrete and glass structures rising from the surface of what was busy streets filled with metal chariots as well as pedestrians.

It was a city.

A human city.

For a moment, I thought I must have been transported back in time and I was fully content to scream with joy before imagining I'd escaped the Great Old Ones as well as their hellish existence. However, that elation swiftly

died as I realized my surroundings were off from what I'd seen in history books as well as the few remaining films that had survived to the present day. Ways both great as well as terrible. The sun in the sky was no yellow-orange orb but a sinister shade of green that provided a strange illumination to everything around me.

The buildings, some larger than any I'd seen even among the ruins of mankind, were also ones that had an other-ish quality to them. Not all of the buildings were made of concrete and human masonry but some of an oily black stone that resembled the kind that made some of the monuments beside me. Others seemed to change ever so slightly in angle as well as dimension depending on how I looked upon them. Far beyond the buildings, I saw also a dark bay of opaque waters that carried black ships to a bustling port. In the center of the bay was a great colossus of a faceless robed figure holding a great key before him.

Then there were the people I saw moving across the streets and I shuddered in revulsion as I realized I had not escaped the terrible universe I had been imprisoned in simply by being born. There were humans among them, dressed in clothes that looked freshly made and not passed down across generations, but there were also other things. Hunched over and deformed figures bundled in heavy robes or coats with their faces masked.

Some of them I recognized to be creatures like the Deep Ones, satyrs or Leng, or ghoulkin. Others still were entirely new to me and the fact they were moving about one another as if as normal as any other ethnicity was as disquieting a sight as any in the Wasteland. It seemed a perverse yet fascinating parody of a city, like Kingsport had been in its final days before swept away by the Mi-Go attack ships. It reminded me of the second place I'd called home, New Ulthar, only if it had a hundred thousand times its people. It was alive and full of people in a way I had not seen for years.

"MADNESS, IS IT NOT?" A guttural inhuman voice of grinding teeth and unearthly tongues spoke behind me. It spoke as a dozen voices overlayed as one.

Rarely had I been taken completely unawares but I was so distracted by the bizarre metropolis around me that I admit I was utterly vulnerable. A frightened terror of the night's hidden horrors—something I had not felt since childhood—filled me as I slowly turned around to face the source of the voice(s).

What greeted me was a sickly red tree without leaves, its branches looking more like skinless muscles than wood, greeted me. It oozed a thick, noxious ichor I could smell from a dozen feet away and reeked of decay mixed with sulfur. The creature's trunk was the most foul and unnatural part of what was already a writhing unnatural thing, though. Pressing forward through its surface as if pushing up against plastic tarp were moving human faces, moaning, and pulsing with an unholy life that should not be.

"Are you the Tree of Azathoth?" I asked.

"YES."

"Are you the creator of this place?" I asked the Tree.

"NO," the Tree replied. "IT IS THE DREAM OF THE ONE WHO IS MANY, WHO WEAVES AN EYE IN THE STORM OF CHAOS. THE SILVER KEY WAS THE TOOL HE FOUND TO LEARN THE WAYS OF THE DREAM QUEST AND LURED THE SMALL GODS OF KADATH TO HIS CHILDHOOD HOME OF BOSTON. NOW IT IS A CITY MADE OF ALL CITIES AND INHABITED BY ALL THE REFUGEES OF YOUR EARTH."

"I do not understand," I said, wondering what it could possibly mean.

"I KNOW."

Well, at least it was human enough to be obnoxious.

"Is this the Dreamlands?"

"YES/NO."

"Very informative," I replied.

"YES," the Tree replied. "YOU HAVE COME HERE TO FIND MEANING."

"Yes," I replied, finding myself able to be honest with this thing more than I could be even with myself. "To give purpose to the pointlessness of my life. I have failed in all endeavors to make something out of the horrors I have endured."

"YOU WILL BE GIVEN THE PURPOSE YOU NEED."

"I will? By whom?" I asked. "You?"

"NO."

"Okay then," I said, wondering if the conversation was going to be entirely this confusing. I had dealt with many enigmatic men and monsters over the years. A few gods as well. All of them seemed to think there was more value in riddle talk than plain speak than I ever did.

“YOU ARE TWO-SOULED. THE KASTRO’VAAL AND THE HUMAN. SLOWLY YOU HAVE BECOME MORE LIKE R’THUGH’CRUAN AS TIME PASSED AND R’THUGH’CRUAN, TOO, HAS BECOME MORE LIKE HIMSELF.”

R’thugh’cruan was the name of the Kastro’vaal who was both my father and past incarnation. Once we had communicated with one another, but slowly our thoughts had merged to the point that I could no longer tell his words from my mine. It was a shame, as that particular bit of insanity had helped maintain the delusion that John Henry Booth was a man separate from the monster. The ancient Greeks taught that those the gods would destroy they first made mad. Instead, I believed those the gods would destroy first sought refuge in madness.

“I know this,” I muttered.

“YOU MUST SOLVE THE RIDDLE OF THE DREAMING CITY. IT WAS NOT BY YOUR HANDS THAT YOU CAME TO THIS PLACE OR THE MAN WHO WAS DEATH. YOU HAVE BEEN SUMMONED BY THE DREAMING KING. YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER TO AWAKEN HIM FROM HIS SLEEP OR LET HIM CONTINUE TO DREAM FOR STRANGE AEONS.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked.

“NOTHING.”

“Oh,” I said, rather disappointed.

“NOTHING FOREVER AND EVER AND AFTER AGAIN.”

I blinked. “Why me?”

“THE DREAMING KING HAS CHOSEN.”

“Where do I start?” I asked, wondering if it could be that easy and who this Dreaming King could be as well as wondering who he was, if anyone, to me.

“LOOK DOWNWARD. YOU WILL FIND THE START OF YOUR JOURNEY IN ITS PREVIOUS END.”

I did so and saw the headstone of the open grave I’d just crawled out of. On it were the words, “Here lies John Henry Booth, Father and Husband.” Below, in cursive, were the words, “He spit in fate’s face.” Which was perhaps the kindest epitaph anyone could have used to summarize my existence. The headstone was absent any birthday or death date but bore a crudely carved Elder Sign on its side, as if someone was defacing my final

resting place. I realized now that the coffin below, somehow, contained my body and I was dead in this place as well as alive simultaneously.

“Well…shit,” I muttered.

Chapter Three

"What does this mean?" I asked, staring at my own grave. "Who is this and why is he here? I don't understand."

The Tree didn't respond.

I looked up and saw the Tree of Azathoth was gone or, more precisely, it was no longer the demigod I'd previously been speaking to. Instead, there was simply a common, deformed-looking oak tree with bare branches in its place. There were some uncomfortably suggestive patterns of bark along its sides but no sign it was the supernatural being I'd previously been speaking to.

The light around me had also changed and I'd looked up to see the sun was now a yellow orb in the sky instead of green. The nameless city beyond me resembled far more the images I'd seen in my youth among New Arkham's archives than the hideous mixture of eldritch stone with human construction. If not for the fact I knew the true and terrifying reality of where I was and what was around me, I would have believed the earlier vision I'd seen had just been a fanciful delusion of a diseased mind.

But, no, this was the delusion.

Under Alan Ward, I'd studied many strange ideas, and one of them had been the ancient gnostics who believed that our world was a corrupt and hideous perversion of true life while a truer, better one existed above us. This supernal realm had been linked to Plato's Cave or realm of true forms. I did not believe in such nonsense but could understand layers of reality. This Dreaming City was a construct, and it was a phantasm of normality overtop another more hideous reality that perhaps held secrets darker still.

I'd caught a brief glimpse of the Dreaming City's true self and wondered what possible motivation for its existence there could be. Was this a refuge for the people of my world? Some sort of ark to carry us through the flood of madness that had consumed our universe? Was it more like a snow globe, made by minds infinitely vaster than our own, there to shake up when they desired? I remembered one that had been a treasured possession of my mother before the death. Perhaps the Mi-Go or Yith had made it as a zoological preserve so that some semblance of our people might carry on.

I remembered the almost quaint-seeming writings of the long dead HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, "No one would have believed in the last

years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water."

Whatever the case, it didn't seem particularly important if I paid any heed to the Tree's claims that I was the key to the survival of this strange place. That was assuming, of course, I even wanted it to survive. I had no idea if these were good men or bad, cruel or kind, deserving or worthless citizenry. Hell, whether any of that even mattered after decades in the Wasteland. I'd tried to be a hero as a New Arkham Ranger and the only thing I'd accomplished was leaving a lot of dead bodies in my wake. Perhaps that was the definition of hero for most of our race's—humanity's—literature, but it left a bitter taste in my mouth equal to Mister Death's potion.

Yet, I had gone to Mister Death to seek an answer to my empty existence, and one had been provided. I was to find this Dreaming King and either wake him up or let him sleep. It was a quixotic quest, more suited for a knight errant than a Wasteland gunslinger, but it was a quest, nonetheless. My situation, after all, could not possibly get worse and *that* particular tempting of fate was something I regretted almost immediately after thinking it.

"Fuck it," I muttered, staring down at the hole in the ground before crawling back inside. If I was going to find any answers, it would probably be in this rather overt reflection of my own mortality. The interior of the grave was large enough for me to stand by the coffin in the muddy earth and I cast its lid open with little difficulty. Apparently, whoever had decided to inter my remains had made it so there was only a latch between my mortal frame and tomb robbers like, well, myself. That was a strange sentence even by my standards.

What greeted me was the foul-smelling—but not exactly uncommon—stench of death from the decay of a man dead for days. Apparently, they didn't believe in embalming in the Dreaming City. The corpse was hard to recognize and wore different clothes than me. Yet, I could tell through its rotted face and sunken eyes that it was indeed me. Much to my surprise, I

saw someone had tossed a billfold on the top of his chest along with a ring of keys.

It was a peculiar homage, but one I, nevertheless, picked up and checked. The interior of the wallet contained identification as well as something I hadn't seen in a very long time: paper currency. Money was certainly something that existed in the Wasteland, but each local community used their own denominations when not bartering.

The faces on the bills were unrecognizable and not of the United States of America, long dead as that entity might be, but the Free Republic of Carter. Much to my amusement, I saw a stylized depiction of the Castle of Kadath and Plateau of Leng on the back of the bills, showing whoever had printed the bills had a sense of humor as well as great knowledge of Dreamlands geography.

More interestingly, perhaps, was a business card that read BOOTH AND ASSOCIATES DETECTIVE AGENCY. It bore an eye on a pentagram and listed a street address plus a phone number. I hadn't seen a working phone since the destruction of New Arkham and it was fascinating to imagine this strange urban hellscape had its own communications system. I was also bemused by the concept of my doppelganger working as an investigator. I'd been Sheriff of New Ulthar for a decade and the enforcer of its few laws, but had never been really required to do much in the way of detecting. Was there so much crime in this place it was worth a profession to hire someone separate from the law?

"Well, look what we have here, a cowboy," a voice spoke above me. It was a thick unrecognizable accent that, nevertheless, dripped with contempt. They were also speaking twentieth- to twenty-first-century American English, which was a language that had changed a great deal over the past couple of centuries.

"A grave-robbing cowboy no less," a second voice, similar in its accent. Perhaps something between Irish and Slavic but more guttural? Phonetics hardly seemed relevant when I'd been caught red-handed robbing my own grave.

Looking upward, I saw two men in long, blue-gray tunics covered in brass buttons with a star on the right lapel near the neck. They had black caps on their heads marked with a similar star and were carrying thick black electric torches. I also noticed they had belts around their tunics that carried a sidearm and a truncheon. There was also a crude, blocky walkie-talkie

that looked like no human hands had made it, rather something more like the Yith.

It took a second for me to process what they were and a word came to mind: police. Sheriffs and street lords had been replaced in more urbanized areas of the Pre-Rising World with officers of the law that existed as a private army of the government. Yet, they were properly separate from the military itself. In New Arkham, we'd had security officers but significant overlap with the army proper.

I put away the wallet with its keychain in my coat pocket, raised my hands, and realized any excuse I made was going to sound feeble. "I am unarmed."

It was a bold-faced lie, I had a revolver enchanted by my longest-lasting lover under my coat, one I'd named Mercury's Gift, but I didn't want to start my introduction into this city by getting into a fight with the locals. Many times I'd run into fights with isolationists and xenophobes with whom it would have been far better to take a conciliatory tone.

I might have been overconfident, though. Too long I'd been something inhuman and unnatural, a shapeshifting tentacled thing that could slaughter an entire town—and had one to my horror—if let from its chain. Two oddly-accented street cops—funny how the lingo seemed to flow across my mind—were not something that I particularly worried about upsetting.

"Get your ass out of there," the taller of the two men said. He was older, white-haired, and bore a long scar across his left check from a knife or claw strike. "Don't make any sudden moves."

Barely more than a child, the younger of the two men—with red hair and freckles—pulled out his pistol and aimed it at me. The weapon was blocky and had an enormous barrel while sporting strange sigils along the side. It was more like a miniature cannon or hand-held shotgun than a traditional pistol and I could tell the weapon was not of human manufacture.

The Dreaming City no longer looked like the alien twisted visage I'd seen earlier, but it was clear that it was certainly not *normal*. I'd visited the Dreamlands with Richard Jameson many times and one of the consistent things about my encounters was that the people there had a profoundly more normalized relationship with the weird and arcane than on my own world—and my own world had become far more so since the Rising than it had during humanity's heyday.

“I’m not resisting,” I said, slowly climbing out of the open grave. This was the second time I’d been taken unawares in less than an hour and it was starting to annoy me. Had I become so used to my own supernaturally-granted invincibility—relative as that may be to mere humans or other things—that I’d lost my edge? It was a terrifying thought.

As a boy, I’d been familiar with the sequential art of a collector who had told of the mythological figures of the Pre-Rising world. Men who could fly, women who could throw magic lassos, and Renaissance men who prowled the night. I’d always found them somewhat ridiculous as no human being could keep such power and remain a relatable being to normal mortals. Power corrupted and absolute power corrupted absolutely. The irony was not lost on me that, granted unnatural strength and life, I might have simply been rendered *lazy* by it.

Standing on the side of the grave with my hands in the air, I tried to focus instead on a plausible deception that might get me out of this. Unfortunately, my credibility instantly took a hit when the second of the police officers walked up to me and checked my coat before pulling out Mercury’s Gift.

The R’lyehian gold plated handled object had been a gift made from the remains of other weapons before sorcery had been worked over it. I never questioned what sort of dark devil’s bargain Mercury’s witchcraft required but I knew it had the ability to slay things that could not be slain. It was also a cleaner weapon than hands, claws, or tendrils for killing. But more than anything it was a reminder of one of my last human relationships.

“Not armed, huh,” the second cop said, disdainfully. It made me think he was trying to imitate his older partner and not entirely succeeding. That was when he took my own firearm and pistol-whipped me, striking me across the face.

The crack was something that sent me spiraling to the ground, face first, the taste of copper-iron blood in my mouth for the first time in years as my vision blurred. It was pain like I hadn’t experienced since I was my year as a slave to the Dunwych. Despite that, it was more confusion mixed with elation and horror that I was feeling pain. The strike against my flesh should have been like raindrops of water against my skin.

Briefly, I thought perhaps Mercury’s creation had some mystical aura or quality about its metal that could do me harm as it had done to so many

creatures of the Wasteland. However, the cut on my busted lip was proof something far more profound had taken place. I was human again.

Weak.

Vulnerable.

Mortal.

What should have been cause for celebration was instead a cause for concern as I turned up my head to the men who stood above me. Their looks were of murderous contempt, expressions I had witnessed upon countless men in the Wasteland. Bandits, slavers, warlords, and kings had all worn it before inflicting their petty power plays on their fellow humans. When survival of the species had taken precedence, they had killed simply to feel like they were not the weakest things left on Earth.

“You look like a foreigner, stranger,” the first of the cops said. “Sound like one, too.”

“We don’t like foreigners in the City,” the second said, clearly following the first one’s lead. He put away his own pistol while keeping my own trained on me. It was quite annoying to be threatened with my own weapon.

“Especially liars and thieves,” the first of the cops said.

The second raised my gun at my head, which would have taken my life even if I had been at full strength. Prone on the ground without my powers and no easy spell to draw from, I differed to the greatest weapon I still possessed: my mind.

“I can pay,” I replied.

That stopped my execution.

“How much?” asked the first cop.

“Everything I have,” I replied.

“Show us,” The first cop replied.

There was a certain level of grand absurdity to my situation that I was sure warmed the damned, cursed soul of Mister Death in whatever hell, alien dimension, or fearsome nothingness it now inhabited. I had killed a shoggoth with a pair of pistols not unlike Mercury’s Gift. I’d survived an encounter with a Color and left it buried underneath a mountain of rubble. I’d slain Elder Things and spoken with Nyarlathotep multiple times. I’d even seen Great Cthulhu himself and managed to walk away from the experience with my sanity tattered but intact. Yet now, I was being threatened with my final repose by these petty bullies in a world I was not entirely sure really existed.

“I’m getting up,” I said, keeping my hands up and doing my best to suppress my murderous rage. I wanted to tear them limb from limb before biting their torsos in half. It was one of the rawest, most alien, and hate-filled feelings I’d experienced in years, yet was now the product of a decidedly mortal mind. The primal ape and the enlightened soldier agreed with the alien Kastro’vaal that these fools had to die. Yet, one wrong move and there would be two John Henry Booths in this grave.

“How much?” the second of the cops asked, licking his lips. There was a slight oddity to his teeth, less flat for chewing and more like pointed pyramids for grinding. I did not doubt they were human but they were of no tribe I recognized and the difference was comparatively minor versus the Deep Ones or serpent men or ghouls that also had once been of the same evolved primates.

“A lot,” I said, thinking of my stolen wallet’s contents. “Hundreds. Twenties.”

I had no idea the actual value of the denominations within, but could count the numbers on their edges.

“Oh, you’re a rich *gwafari* are ya?” the first cop said, accenting the foreign word like he was cursing.

I didn’t have to understand the language to know a slur when I heard one. Reaching into my coat, I slowly extended the wallet. “I’m getting it out now.”

The second of the officers reached for it, keeping his gun trained on me, only for me to grab said weapon and aim it at his fellow before forcing the trigger down. Mercury’s Gift cut down the first police officer. His body burst into flames from the unearthly bullet, burning him from the inside out while he gave a tortured but short-lived cry.

The second officer struggled for the weapon only for me to force him to the ground, grabbing the pistol at his belt with my other hand and having two in hand while he was unarmed on the ground.

“Oh God, oh God,” the second officer said, terrified. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

I lifted Mercury’s Gift, aimed it, and shot him in the head. His body, too, became an unrecognizable mass of burnt flesh.

Taking a moment to look at the charred corpses beside me, I proceeded to push both into the open grave site below and looked for a shovel to dump some dirt over them. I couldn’t stay here to bury them, but maybe I could

hide the results of the slaughter I'd created long enough to get out of here. I didn't know how the locals would react to the deaths of their law enforcement personnel, but I doubted it would be grateful.

That was when I noticed the Tree of Azathoth return to its unnatural appearance for a moment.

"BLOOD HAS BEEN OFFERED AND BLOOD WILL BE PAID. YOU WILL CREATE MANY MORE DEATHS BEFORE THIS DAY IS DONE. YOU WILL SEE FACES YOU KNOW BUT KNOW THEM NOT. YOUR ENEMY IS WATCHING."

I wondered if it was being literal or not. "Who is my enemy?"

Much to my horror and disgust, a face identical to my son Gabriel appeared out of the trunk of the tree before speaking in a single solitary voice. It recited lines from *War of the Worlds*, like I'd used to do so as a child and had just been thinking about.

"Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us."

The Tree of Azathoth was struck by a bolt of lightning that seemingly appeared from nowhere, causing its branches to burst into flames that turned several noxious colors not found in the natural world before consuming the immortal being utterly. Whether it had chosen suicide over continued existence or had been struck down by this alien world for revealing its secret was unclear. When the flames died down, only a burned-out, withered husk of a tree remained and no sign of its mystical nature. Its secrets had died with it and whatever legacy it had left with me.

"Well, that was fucking weird," I muttered, turning around to leave for the city.

Chapter Four

The Dreaming City really was nameless as every pedestrian I asked just referred to it as “The City,” and was a place that I struggled very hard to adapt to. I’d been to large urban areas before, but the largest had been Kingsport and it had been only a shadow of the size of this place. The people gathered in the remnants of mankind’s former communities had put on the dress of city dwellers. These were the real thing, not inhabiting the burned-out remnants of the past, but living in the heart of a growing, thriving municipality.

Still, I was painfully aware that I was a fish out of water as I walked through the crowds of people moving to and fro along the streets filled with automobiles. Hell, maybe even worse since I knew Deep Ones existed. I stood out with my clothes, accent, and the fact I was bewildered by the sights around me. It was doubly frustrating because I’d always considered myself a cosmopolitan as well as well-traveled being. However, it seemed like a man capable of navigating Wastelands where mile tall statues of K’tullu and Hastur existed was not quite able to deal with the complexities of streetlights.

Seriously, I was almost struck by cars twice.

To my credit, I was adapting and the fact that I was wandering aimlessly didn’t mean I was *lost*. One was never lost when one was taking in one’s environment and learning from observation. If you did that, you were *exploring* and every bit of information was a potential clue to new revelations.

By the time I was leaning up against a streetlight with a strange crystal top in front of a movie theater—something I was basically familiar with the concept of from old pictures—I’d learned several interesting tidbits about the Dreaming City:

1. We were in the Dreamlands, and this was an island of sorts in the middle of them that held perhaps a few million inhabitants. The locals knew of such dream cities as Celephais, the original Ulthar, and Dulan-Leen. They even traded with them if some sailors I’d met were to be believed.

2. There was no set time period of fashion, technology, or architecture. It seemed roughly 1930s or 1940s to the final years of Pre-Rising Era. People wore fedoras, trench coats, and long dresses while holding holographic

handheld crystalline computers. Most of the buildings were an Art Deco style, however.

3. It seemed to be mostly North American influenced but there were occasional bursts of far different culture. I'd passed a Greek Orthodox style church that, nevertheless, seemed devoted to Egyptian gods.

4. I believed the brief vision I'd had of the more alien part of the city was its true appearance and I was surrounded by inhuman things and objects, but they were covered in some sort of illusion. Why the more monstrous beings would consent to such a thing was anyone's guess, though, but no one seemed to be acknowledging it either.

5. Everyone here was a completely rude asshole. I'd been bumped into, sworn at, and pushed aside a dozen times. Personally, I blamed it on the fact that I seemed to be the only person who was armed except for the unfortunate two police I'd encountered. It was my opinion that a well-armed society might not be a safer society—quite the opposite if the number of bodies I'd had to bury in New Ulthar were any indication—but it was certainly a polite society.

After hours of wandering, I had to admit I was no closer to figuring out what I was supposed to *do* here if anything. The Tree of Azathoth—before its unexpected and wholly unnecessary self-immolation (if self-immolation it was)—had been maddeningly vague. I also had no idea if I even wanted to follow up on its commands.

"What am I doing here?" I muttered, rubbing the bridge of my nose. Maybe I was looking at it all wrong and the journey was more important than the destination. I'd come here seeking a place to escape the inevitable final death of the last humans on my world. I'd certainly found it. Maybe instead of trying to seek clues to a quixotic quest, I should be focusing on finding a place to stay and a source of income.

Or food.

I was hungry.

Ravenously so, in fact.

It was a strange experience and I wondered if I'd needed to eat after my transformation to full Kastro'vaal form. I'd certainly done it, but it made me wonder if that had been more habit than necessity and my source of nourishment had come from another source like the sun or cosmic radiation. It didn't matter, though, because I certainly needed it now. I also needed a

set of facilities since it seemed relieving myself in an alley would be considered rude around here.

Seeing two young women leave the theater, both with yellow-green skin, jewels in their teeth, and wearing all-black clothing, I approached them with my hat over my chest.

“Pardon me, madams, but do you know where I might find an establishment to dine?”

Both looked at me in disdain. The one on the left was the first to respond.

“Back off, gwafari. Go rifle through a dumpster if you’re hungry.”

Seriously, everyone in this town was an asshole.

“Try a diner,” the one on the right was marginally more polite. “There’s one at the end of the block.”

“Thank you, madame,” I said, feeling like I should have just wandered some more instead.

The pair went back to their conversation while I turned around to get some lunch. That was when I heard my first clue.

Or perhaps it was a miracle.

Or curse.

Mister Death had sent me here for a reason after all and the Tree knew exactly which way to manipulate me.

“I loved this movie. I know it’s an older one, but I think it’s his best work,” the left girl said.

“Yes, he’s working on a new one now,” the right girl said. “Another Gabriel Booth original.”

I turned around and stared at them both, struggling to keep the intensity of my interest from my stare and failing.

“Gabriel Booth?”

The left girl rolled her eyes and pointed at one of the posters on the side of the movie theater’s stone walls. It depicted a portrait of a barrel-chested, bronze-skinned man with an open shirt facing a sinister-looking black-skinned pharaoh. To be frank, I found it vaguely offensive. The title of the movie was *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath.*

At the bottom of the poster, it listed a bunch of names ranging from G’mnarl’ash as Richard Pickman, Abdul Al-Ackbar as Atal, Vincent Keaton as Randolph Carter to A Silver Key Production. It also said that it was directed and written by Gabriel Booth.

I immediately bought a ticket to the next showing.

I shall spare you the details of my attendance of the performance as they were not particularly of note. I barely understood the currency but could tell I was being overcharged, the drink was more syrup than water, and they served bags of sunflower seeds as concessions. The seats were dirty, the floor sticky, and barely anyone was attending this showing despite the praise of the two young women. The production, though, was a thing of beauty.

The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath was the story of a mortal dreamer, Randolph Carter, who could not get the image of a beautiful sunset city from his dreams. Deciding to seek the puny gods of Earth for knowledge of where this city was, he went on a fantastic adventure through the Dreamlands to find it. In the end, he found the home of the Earth's gods, Kadath, empty and was confronted by none other than Nyarlathotep.

Seeing the black-skinned Pharoah depicted on screen was something of a shock since occultists had done their best to suppress the name of the true gods from the public until the subject had no longer mattered with the Rising. Even then, almost no one I'd ever met muttered the Crawling Chaos' name without terror or reverence. Here, he was depicted as nothing more than a stock villain menacing our hero.

But it was the ending of the movie that shocked me. Nyarlathotep revealed that Kadath was empty because the tiny gods of Earth had fled their celestial domicile in order to inhabit the sunset city that Randolph Carter was seeking—which he had dreamed into existence from his childhood memories of Boston, Massachusetts. The final shot of the film panned over the dream city and the strong implications were that the Dreaming City was, indeed, the place created from Randolph Carter's dreams—grown exponentially over the centuries from the 1920s or so when he'd first made it a reality.

When the film ended on its credits, I couldn't help but wonder about this providential revelation. If this was the origin of the Dreaming City, it certainly explained a great deal. It also might have provided me a tantalizing clue as to what the Tree had been speaking about during its bizarre mad ramblings. The Dreaming King was almost certainly this Randolph Carter, choosing whether to awaken him or not was perhaps related to this strange city, and the threat was to the society that I had found myself trapped in.

A part of me pondered, for the second time, *Alice in Wonderland* or, more precisely, *Through the Looking Glass*. It seemed to be a day for contemplating long dead writers and their fictions, but we were in a universe shaped by the subconsciousness of both humanity as well as the Great Old Ones. Alice had encountered the Red King who had dreamt of her just as she had dreamt of him.

One of the curiouser—or perhaps curiouser and curiouser if I were to engage in uncharacteristic whimsy—notions of the book had been that if the Red King had awoken, Alice would disappear. “Out like a candle.” That she, a free-thinking, and sentient being, only existed so long as the Red King continued to think of her. I’d always found that a disquieting notion and been nonplussed to note that several religions had similar ideas about creation. Some of which had been proven correct when the Great Old Ones had awakened to shape our reality with the strength of their thoughts.

It was far too early to contemplate such a thing, but perhaps that was the threat the Tree of Azathoth had forewarned me about? That it had led me to this place because its existence was commensurate upon dreams feeding it? A place where millions of people might exist, free from the Great Old Ones’ destructive power, but only survived if there was a dreamer at the center of it? The late Alan Ward had planned to evacuate children of the Wasteland to the Dreamland, perhaps to this place, and it had involved their pagan sacrifice.

If so. did I want to save this place? If this was just an illusion, it was a false paradise—or some definition of the word paradise—and it’d be better to find the real people of this place before leading them to a true salvation in another universe. I knew the latter existed because Marcus Whateley had spoken of them. Places where the Great Old Ones remained asleep or might not even exist at all. Perhaps it was my job to find the Dreaming King and awaken them rather than keep them asleep.

“Perhaps you are presently lying on the ground of the tent of Mister Death’s, choking to death on your own vomit while high as a nightgaunt flying the cosmic rays,” a voice identical to my own spoke from the chair beside me.

I bolted from my chair and fell to the ground, stumbling and moving across the sticky surface. This time I was not upset about my skittishness nor being taken by surprise since the voice belonged to someone who could not be defied. He simply was, is, and shall be: Nyarlathotep the God with a

Thousand Faces. Presently, he was sitting in the chair next to me, wearing my face, a trench coat, and a fedora.

“You,” I said, standing up. Strangely, I was inclined to ask a question far different from the ones a normal man might ask in my place. “Where the hell have you been?”

Nyarlathotep blinked, which was a rarity. “Oh, I do love when you zig instead of zag. What do you mean?”

“It’s been twenty years,” I said. I expected him to say such was an eyeblink for him or something similar, but I’d honestly felt abandoned by the Other God—a sentiment that showed just how insanely desperate my situation had grown. The last I’d seen of the Crawling Chaos had been him leading a siege on New Ulthar for seemingly no other reason than the dreadful being’s amusement.

“Would you prefer I go back to that time and speak with you then?” Nyarlathotep asked instead. “I could go further and upend your life by making you a girl, never born, or a shade of the spectrum visible only to ants.”

“No thank you,” I said, knowing there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop him if he chose to do anything to me.

“No, there is not,” Nyarlathotep said, responding to my thoughts. “You are a favorite book of mine, John, or at least this avatar’s. I sometimes enjoy returning to you and scribbling in the margins. However, never forget that you are unable to see beyond the confines of your dimensions to the universe beyond.”

I stared at him. “Why are you here?”

“I’m in the movie,” Nyarlathotep said, gesturing. “Why wouldn’t I be here?”

That was one of the great frustrations of dealing with the Black Soldier. He was just human enough to have a twisted sense of humor. Of course, according to Nyarlathotep, he was every god simultaneously and the reason he had the attributes that he did was because we mortals—and some immortals—assigned our personality traits to him. Nyarlathotep was an answer to the problem of evil: why did it exist? Because God was an asshole.

Nyarlathotep laughed at my thoughts, responding to them as if they were spoken aloud. “That I am.”

“Why am I here?” I asked, hoping Nyarlathotep would explain.

“Because you wanted to be here,” Nyarlathotep replied. “You prayed in the emptiness of the wastes for salvation and had the misfortune of having me listen. The Tree was my voice and prophet, and now you are caught in my story to play out until the final film reel rolls.”

“Is my son here?” I asked.

“Yes,” Nyarlathotep said. “So is your daughter or one of them at least. So are many other familiar faces. But are the people who wear them real? Are you?”

“Am I?” I asked.

“Why don’t you ask yourself,” Nyarlathotep said. “If you mean the dead John, he was a John and there are other Johns and we are all John together.”

“Where do I go next?” I asked.

“Outside,” Nyarlathotep said. “So many questions. You get one more.”

I contemplated my choice of options before deciding on the best one. “How is this going to end?”

“There is no ending,” Nyarlathotep said. “When you finish the story, it will still be there to be read again if you like. However, the ending doesn’t change unless you rip out the pages. Randolph Carter dreamed he could get the better of me and managed to do so as a result. I eventually paid him back for it by appealing to his greed, lust for knowledge, and idolatrous belief in his own enlightenment. I trapped him with one of his past lives in the same body and watched him tear his mind apart in the struggle for supremacy. Much the same as you. Except, somehow, you just became… you.”

I wasn’t stupid enough to ask another question. “Bully for me.”

“Solve this mystery for me,” Nyarlathotep said, conjuring a snow globe that said THE CITY in big white letters over an eldritch skyline. It was undoubtedly a reference to an earlier thought I’d had about this place. “In it there will be blood, scares, excitement, and a girl for you. If you like that sort of thing still. Maybe even a city to call your own.”

“And if not…” I trailed off rather than making it a question.

“There are always other Johns. Hopefully, you’ll be luckier than the ones I’ve already broken.”

With that, Nyarlathotep disappeared.

I shook my head and went to the theater lobby, still hungry and now more confused than ever. Much to my irritation, it was snowing outside the theater now. A further sign of how far Nyarlathotep’s influence extended as

well as how random his whimsies were. The lobby was notably empty, and no one was attending the concession stand.

That was when someone clicked a gun's hammer behind the back of my head.

A female voice spoke, "Don't move or you're dead."

Seriously, I really needed to work on my situational awareness. This was just embarrassing now.

Then I recognized the voice.

Chapter Five

"Jessica?" I asked, aloud.

No.

It was not possible. I was dreaming. Which, ironically, was a thought that shook me out of my state of disbelief and back to reality because, yes, I was dreaming. I was in a city that had been conjured out of the ether of a dimension created by thought by an overly imaginative Bostonian from the 1920s.

Jessica O'Reilly had been one of Gamma Squadron, my best friend, and a woman I had been more than a little in love with. The pretty, brown-haired girl had defied expectations and become harder than most men as well someone who managed to pull herself from most encounters with things that would break even the hardiest minds, including the complete loss of her family.

Jessica was also, not to put too fine a point on it, dead. Which wasn't something that necessarily meant a great deal in my time in the Wasteland. There were magics of resurrection, reducing a human to essential salts or conjuring a simulacrum from memories among other powers, but these were always a gateway to even further heartbreak.

"Turn around," the voice spoke.

I lifted my hands in the air and did so, wondering if it was going to become a habit of my getting captured while I was in this city. I would not trade my humanity for anything in the world but if weakness was the price of mortality, perhaps it was not quite such a sublime treasure as I'd been giving it credit for.

The sight that greeted me when I turned around was heartbreaking. It was, indeed, Jessica with short brown hair cut into a bob. She was wearing a men's button-down shirt with a holster visible on the side and a pair of blue jeans. Her face was also subtly different in a way that was only noticeable if you were looking very intently at someone while comparing them to someone whose visage was burned into your mind.

Jessica's—this Jessica—face was possessed of slightly softer features. The Wasteland aged you, at least if you weren't a humanoid abomination conceived by a creature that had infected your mother at some point in the past. There was none of the scarring and weathered decay that left her

looking like a woman of forty when she was in her thirties. Now, I'd put her at her forties, and she looked closer to her early thirties.

I feel like this might come off the wrong way, but Jessica had slightly rounder features as well. Which I understand is a deadly insult among certain families in more civilized territories but when dealing with people who are very often near starvation is hardly a displeasing look. This woman, identical in so many other respects, had not lived in the Wasteland.

"I'm unarmed," I said, keeping my hands in the air.

"That's a fucking lie," Jessica said, taking the gun from my pocket.

I sighed. "I should probably stop repeating it."

"Especially when a grave digger found two dead cops in your grave an hour ago," Jessica said. "Your doing?"

"I feel answering that question is inherently prejudicial," I replied.

Jessica rolled her eyes. "You look like him, you sound like him, and you even move like him. Except, you're not him."

"The him, I presume, being the late John Henry Booth who was a detective?" I asked.

A flash of anger passed across her face. "I fucking hate this town. It's bad enough I'm getting used to all the weird shit left and right, but just when I think I've got a handle on things, people get gunned down and then walk right back into your life."

"Believe me when I say this is equally disconcerting," I replied.

"I find that hard to believe," Jessica said.

"I saw you ripped apart," I replied, leaving the part out about the fact I was almost certainly the person who'd done it. It had been the early days in my transformation into a monster and I'd not yet mastered control over the horrific rages within. The blessings in my life could be counted on two hands, but surely the greatest one was I could not remember specifics.

Jessica paused in her examination of my gun, not taking her gun off me. "Okay, yeah, that would do it."

Jessica proceeded to hand me back my weapon, much to my surprise.

I took it. "You seem awfully trusting."

"Are you a shapeshifter?" Jessica asked.

"Not anymore," I replied.

"Evil wizard?" Jessica asked.

"Define evil," I replied, not helping my case. "Any decent Wasteland mystic knows a few spells here and there. Really, I feel like a wizard should

require more accreditation than that.”

“Body stealing parasite?” Jessica asked.

“Do you know any bodies worth stealing?” I asked.

“Nyarlathotep?” Jessica finished off her line of questioning.

“I have no way of confirming or denying,” I replied, honestly not sure some days. “Though if I am, I have serious issues with self-loathing.”

I was still getting used to the casual way people threw around the name of the Crawling Chaos. I shouldn’t have been: Nyarlathotep was but one name of his in a billion and no more likely to conjure him than the Haunter in the Dark, the Black Soldier, or Flagg. Yet, the sheer lack of fear when invoking him surprised me.

“Yeah, you’re John,” Jessica nodded. “You’re the only guy I know who looks like an Arkham tank and talks like a snooty Miskatonic intellectual. What’s with the cowboy get up?”

I didn’t miss a beat. “I’m a cowboy.”

Jessica blinked then hugged me.

I didn’t know how to immediately respond because someone who I had lost who was back from the dead was a gift beyond value, but I was afraid of accepting it for fear of it just being a prelude to something much more horrifying happening. There was also the fact it was very unlikely this was *my* Jessica.

No, in an infinite multiverse of possibilities, each existing for both an eternity and an instant before vanishing, this was just someone eerily similar to my Jessica. Indeed, it was possible she was nothing more than a chimera, a phantasm, or delusion of this place that may well not even exist outside of my own mind. This could well be my dying dream as I writhed my last breaths upon Mister Death’s poisonous ichor.

If so, then no reason not to lean into it. I responded to her hug by kissing her passionately on the lips and feeling her return the favor. It was an awkward moment as both of us realized we were kissing someone else, someone long and not so long gone. We pulled back from each other, each of us parting our lips and taking a breath to steady ourselves.

“I take it your John hasn’t been gone long,” I replied before looking around the lobby. “Where did everyone go?”

“Three days,” Jessica replied. “As for everyone in the lobby, they cleaned out when I showed them my fake badge and said there was a dangerous criminal on the loose.”

“That seems like it’d get you in trouble with the law,” I replied.

“No more than usual,” Jessica narrowed her eyes. “And less than I probably should be. The cops were the ones who killed you.”

I stared at her. “I see. An ignominious end for a John Booth, no matter what the reality.”

“More so when you know who ordered it,” Jessica said, clenching her teeth. “We need to get you out of those clothes.”

“I’d prefer if you bought me lunch first,” I replied. “The only thing I’ve had since coming to this place is sunflower seeds and carbonated sugar water with ice.”

“A weird way to say cola but sure,” Jessica muttered. “What I mean to say is it didn’t take long for me to track down a six-foot-two Black man dressed like a cowboy. It won’t take long for the Knights of Arkham.”

“The who?” I asked.

“Out the door,” Jessica said, gesturing to the theater’s fire exit back where I came from. “We’ll take my car.”

I wasn’t sure about the urgency given I’d been here watching a motion picture this entire time, but I wasn’t about to question a Roman about Rome, nor a R’lyehian about R’lyeh. I followed her closely until the two of us were in a seedy alley where there was a strange metal automobile that was difficult to describe the make or model of. I was familiar with cars, but all of the ones left over after the Pre-Rising Era, with the exception of the Blue Meanie, were hodgepodge Frankenstein’s monsters made from whatever parts still in working order after a century of decay.

This one seemed vaguely 1940s-ish? 1950s? It had four doors, fishy-colored scale leather seats, and a pentagram with an eye hood ornament. Honestly, my knowledge of Pre-Rising technology was a bit spotty, but it had an electrical engine and other strange machinery that kept reminding me this was not Earth, nor were its people Earthlings. Though the idea of the Mi-Go or Great Race sitting down in an auto plant, dictating the latest designs was something too humorous to contemplate seriously.

“Nice ride,” I replied.

“I got for saving a man from a bad marriage,” Jessica replied, entering the driver’s side, and sitting down. It was notably on the right side of the car. “His bride tried to eat him on their wedding night.”

“Ah,” I said, going around to the passenger door and sliding on in. “Still better than my marriage.”

Jessica paused at the wheel as if I'd said something troublesome. "You should get rid of the hat."

"The hat stays," I replied.

Jessica glared at me. "Because you want to be even more recognizable as an outsider."

"Fine," I muttered, taking off the hat and putting it in the backseat. "I want it back, though."

Jessica started up the car and pulled out into the city streets. "Honestly, I'm not sure how we're going to keep a lid on this. The police are going to be howling for blood due to those cops you killed."

"I didn't say I'd killed them," I pointed out.

"You didn't deny it either," Jessica replied. "It's no skin off my back. This city is a wretched hive of sin, lies, hookers, and thieves. And those are the good parts."

"What are the bad parts?" I asked.

"Religious fanatics, fascists, cops, crooked politicians, and the Knights of Arkham," Jessica replied.

"You mentioned the Knights earlier," I said, frowning. "May I ask who they are and why they want me dead?"

"A while ago—not sure how long, time is funny here—there was a flood of immigrants," Jessica said, frowning. "People from a town called Kingsport. Among them were a lot of soldiers and crazy people that swore they were Arkhamites. Not that I could tell the difference. Either way, they've taken a lot of positions in power in the city. They hate anyone who isn't pure 100% human and have very specific ideas about what that means. They worship Randolph Carter as a god and make it their goal to keep Arkham secure. Which means driving out everybody else, I guess."

I almost laughed at the absurdity. "New Arkham was where I was born. The people there drove me out because I was a monster."

"Yeah, that's what the other John said," Jessica replied. "Apparently, he came from a New Arkham too. I don't know if you're from two identical realities or you split or what."

"I'm going to pretend it makes sense and ignore the larger philosophical implications," I said, leaning down in the passenger's side as we pulled to a stop next to a black and white police vehicle. We were stopped at a sort of automated light-based navigation system, relying on different colors to direct traffic.

“Probably a smart idea,” Jessica said, sucking in her breath. “You know your other wife is the Chief of Police, right?”

I blinked, pondering that. “You mean Martha Booth?”

“She goes by Martha Peasley now,” Jessica replied, pulling away from the police car. “And yeah.”

“So, she’s the one who had me killed,” I replied, sitting back up. At this point, it didn’t matter if it was my Martha or not. It seemed this Booth and I were close enough to be identical.

“Yeah, I’m afraid so,” Jessica said. “Maybe she didn’t know bullets would kill you, but there’s something about New Arkham that makes some of the monsters more human and some of the humans—”

“More monstrous?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Jessica replied.

“The cops I killed weren’t Arkhamites,” I said, finally admitting it. “But they were no more friendly. I also wouldn’t put it past Martha to kill me whether it was with a heavy heart or a glad one. Ours was always a marriage of convenience and she was ever more ruthless than I was.”

Jessica snorted.

“Have you met any other of my…uh, the other Booth’s associates?” I asked, wondering if the Tree of Azathoth had been speaking literally about knowing people and yet not knowing them. Certainly, it seemed to be the case with Jessica.

“A few,” Jessica said, giving me both hope and fear. “Gabriel, your daughter, Mercury—”

“Mercury is here?” I asked.

“No,” Jessica said, “She went off with another Booth. Apparently, they were seeking another Promised Land.”

“I’m losing track,” I replied.

Jessica smirked. “Well, there are plenty of people from the Wasteland. Too many for the locals, who are good at tolerating things I can’t stand to be in the presence of and freak me the hell out. But something about Arkhamites freaks them out. Oh, right, it’s the fact they’re all enormous assholes.”

“So, the newcomers are in charge and racist against the nonhumans and the locals hate the newcomers but are reasonably tolerant to the nonhumans.”

“That’s about the size of it,” Jessica said.

“But you’re not an Arkhamite,” I replied, pointing out the not-insignificant detail that my Jessica had grown up in New Arkham beside me.

“No,” Jessica admitted. “The other Booths had the same reaction. Curiosity, disappointment, despair.”

“Where are you from?” I asked, trying—and failing—not to go through those exact emotions.

“I don’t know,” Jessica replied.

I blinked. “You don’t know.”

“I just woke up in your office one day,” Jessica shook her head, “knowing everything about who I was and where I came from. I had a whole backstory of a husband who left with the kids, skills in shooting as well as tracking, and a wallet full of cash. But I can’t describe where I’m from, what my parents looked like, or even who my children were.”

“Robert Junior and Howard,” I replied.

“Yeah,” Jessica said, absently. “So the Booths always say. It takes a while to warm to me. You’re faster than most.”

I looked down at Jessica’s hand and saw a wedding band. “You said Booth’s other wife.”

Jessica didn’t respond for a moment. “Booth and Associates. I’m a Booth.”

Ah.

Chapter Six

"I see," I said, taking that interesting new factoid into account.

"I take it we weren't married in your world?" Jessica asked.

"You married him in this one" I said, deflecting.

"You're deflecting," Jessica said.

"You're very good at this," I replied.

"Almost like I'm a detective," Jessica replied.

I smirked. "Almost."

"Let me guess, it was that whore, Mercury," Jessica said, with a lot more resentment than came from just fighting over a man. Of course, the Mercury and Jessica I'd known had shared a deep and passionate dislike of one another for many other reasons. Some people just didn't gel together no matter how hard they tried and neither had tried very hard.

"No, it was more the fact you were dead," I replied. "Before that, it was your husband, the other Jessica's husband, Robert Senior."

"I notice you didn't defend Mercury to the whore comment," Jessica replied.

"The one I knew literally owned a brothel in the town we lived in," I replied. "Good honest work."

"Of course you'd say that." Jessica rolled her eyes.

"You disagree?" I asked, looking out the window and passing a family dressed in black with veils over the men as well as the women. Underneath, I could see the itchy, dark-scaled skin of Deep Ones. It was interesting to note I could feel the supernatural all around me under illusions, but these did not hide their true nature. Were they unable or unwilling to undergo such magics or were glamours for sale like cosmetics so that only the very rich could possess them? What made humanity desirable and inhumanity not? It was a question I normally wouldn't have thought to ask but twenty years in the Wasteland had broadened my idea of aesthetics.

"Let's just say the sex workers of the city rarely have a say in who they sell to," Jessica said.

"Well, that's different," I replied.

"Is it?" Jessica asked.

"That's slavery," I replied. "I kill slavers."

Jessica smiled. “Well, take a good look at the City. You’ll find a lot of that around here too, even if it’s technically illegal under the Laws of Carter.”

“I think I’m supposed to find him,” I replied.

“Good luck.” Jessica snorted.

I looked at her sideways. “I take it he’s not an easy man to find?”

Jessica shook her head. “You’re talking about the mythical god-king of this island in the chaos. No one has seen or talked with Randolph Carter in centuries except for your son.”

“My son,” I repeated.

“Yeah,” Jessica nodded. “The City’s most famous director and owner of the only movie studio in the world, at least if you define the world as the city limits. Supposedly, Randolph Carter was the one who led Gabriel and the other Arkhamites here. It’s also what inspired him to make his movie about the City’s founding.”

“Interesting,” I said, staring at her. “That’s a place to start at least.”

“My John wasn’t close to Gabriel,” Jessica said. “At least he’s not a fascist. The Knights of Arkham would be shutting down his movies if not for the fact it’d cause riots.”

“I haven’t seen him in twenty years,” I replied. “I was always closer to Anita. Is there any news of her?”

Jessica shook her head. “Sorry.”

Jessica mentioned my daughter earlier so either she was lying, or it was referring to a different daughter. Either way, it was fascinating to think both of them had arrived here. Here, perhaps was a place they could escape the curse of being Kastro’vaal. However, it occurred to me this was also a place where humanity might be even more dangerous than monstrosity.

After all, decades had passed for me like the passing of hours. Would I grow old and die here? Mercury had wanted to escape that possibility more than anything. I had given it little thought. Death as a man was better than eternity as a monster, but now the thought was repulsive if it meant my children dying. Perhaps them being Kastro’vaal would not be such a bad thing if it meant centuries or even millennium more of life. Perhaps I was also simply rethinking my own immortality since I was simultaneously here chatting with a doppelganger of my Jessica while my corpse was rotting in a coffin next to the cops I’d just killed.

“I admit, a movie director wasn’t what I expected of him in life,” I replied.

“What did you expect?” Jessica asked.

“A wizard,” I replied, dryly. “Either that or a madman.”

“So you did predict he’d work in cinema,” Jessica said, pulling to a stop next to a street vendor.

“What’s here?” I asked.

“I thought you were hungry,” Jessica said. “The best food in town isn’t from restaurants.”

“I find that claim extremely dubious,” I said, watching her purchase two tubes of meat inside a long casing of bread with chili on the top. She also purchased drinks that were full of ice, a concept I was still getting used to. In the Wasteland, you had boiled water, boiled tea, boiled coffee made of something other than coffee beans, animal milks, and various kinds of alcohol.

This one seemed to be a kind of iced tea, which seemed to defeat the purpose of tea. Still, it was drinkable.

“Enjoy your hot dog,” Jessica said. “Just try not to think about where the meat comes from.”

I stared at her.

“Not exactly much farmland out here,” Jessica said. “Let’s just say a lot of the meat here comes from either the ocean or the rats.”

“And?” I asked, not particularly perturbed by the prospect of eating rodents. I’d eaten far worse things in the Wasteland.

“Our rats tend to have human faces,” Jessica said, dryly.

I stared at her, checking for sarcasm then looked at the hotdog before looking back at her. “I’m still eating it.”

Jessica smirked. “You did the exact same thing to me when I first came to the city. I’ve waited years to pay you back for it.”

I chewed down on the hot dog and it didn’t taste like it contained any human remains, though sawdust was a possibility. Hunger was the best pickle, and I wasn’t exactly going to be looking a gift horse in the mouth—a proverb I had never truly understand until I’d once seen a second head inside one rather nastily mutated nag’s throat.

“I’ll need to speak with Gabriel,” I replied. “Closeness or not.”

“You need to be thinking about getting out of town,” Jessica said. “My John, the late John, died trying to get in touch with his son. It’s where the

police will be looking for you."

"They think I'm dead," I replied, wondering if my son was closer to his mother than he'd been before.

Martha Booth had married me out of obligation, not love, because all members of our society were supposed to have at least three children. We'd fallen short and Martha had never been particularly fond of the ones we had. To be fair, I hadn't exactly been the greatest parent myself. The Wastelands had claimed my time and attention far more than they should have. But I granted myself the excuse that I hadn't exactly had the best role models to draw from: my mother had been a drunk and my father had tried to kill me.

To this day, I wasn't sure if my mother's alcoholism had been related to the knowledge she'd conceived with a monster or if my father's attempted murder of me was because of my inhuman heritage. Somehow, I doubted it and believed, instead, that he'd simply believed I was the product of more mundane adultery. Why? I hated my father more than any creature of the Wasteland or mad prophet of the Old Ones. I had no desire to muddy the purity of that loathing with an understandable motivation of transcendental fear.

Gods, I was a wordsmith in my musings, wasn't I?

"Because you are dead," Jessica spoke as if lecturing a very small child. "Is going home not an option?"

I blinked, pondering the barren emptiness I'd left behind. "There is no home left. Whether fled, dead, or vanished—the dunes are just empty. Once you couldn't drive or ride a day without encountering another settlement. When I left, I had been suffering solitudes that lasted months on occasion."

"Is that better or worse than a city of monsters?" Jessica asked, pulling us into a parking lot beside a structurally sound but rundown brick building.

"He who said hell is other people has never been truly alone," I said, insulting Sartre. "I have no idea if this place is an illusion, reality, or dying dream, but it is better than the alternative."

Jessica stared at me, opened her mouth, then closed it. "Your place is undoubtedly still being watched, John. I have a bunch of work to do in our office but there's a back way into it. We can enter through the ghoul tunnels."

"They're still watching my office even though I'm dead?" I asked.

"In strange aeons—" Jessica shrugged.

“Please don’t,” I interrupted her.

“Let’s just say death is not the impediment that it used to be,” Jessica said. “Especially in our line of work.”

“Yes,” I said, dryly. “We solve…mysteries?”

It sounded so strange. I’d been a voracious reader during my youth and poured through much of the New Arkham library to memorize as much of the Pre-Rising World as possible. I knew that detectives had once been a popular genre of fiction but the Wasteland was full of mysteries. You survived by leaving them alone. As had been explained to me: “If you see a pure beautiful lake surrounded by bleached white skeletons, leave it the fuck alone.”

“Something like that,” Jessica replied, getting out of the car. “Justice by other means is still justice.”

“I’ve never found justice to be a particularly relevant concept,” I replied, opening the door and stepping out. “Law and order? Sure. Revenge? Absolutely. Justice? That seems to rely on too many universal absolutes I’ve never been able to prove exist as well as have plenty of evidence do not.”

“Call it what you will,” Jessica replied. “There are a lot of people in this city who don’t trust the police, hate the mobs, and loathe their particular religious communities. That doesn’t leave them with many options. The City is on an island surrounded by dreams and sometimes, the only protection you have is a gun for hire.”

“That’s a mercenary, not a detective,” I replied.

“Same difference some nights, ask the Pinkertons,” Jessica said.

“Are they friends of yours?” I asked.

I had to admit, her description of our job here was making me more suspicious rather than putting my mind at ease. I’d yet to find anything in this world, or any other world now that I thought about it, that amounted to a free lunch. Everything had a cost, even true love, and the idea of being any sort of “good guy” made me uneasy.

I’d done what I’d had to do to survive in New Arkham, the Wasteland, and as Sheriff of New Ulthar. Enforcing the law there had meant hanging men for stealing water, gunning down those people who were seeking their own justice, and often choosing which evil to side with in a conflict where there was no clear lesser one let alone good. Morality was a delusion for

better men than myself and I wondered what it said about me that one of these better men was apparently, well, me.

Jessica walked to a basement walk-up next to the red brick building and started heading down. There was a little bronze sign that said, “Booth and Associates” in a language that I didn’t recognize. It only occurred to me how strange it was to be able to understand a completely foreign language when I was joining her in descending. Perhaps not all of my inner weirdness had departed.

“So, what is it you need to get from Randolph Carter anyway? Or your son? I’m still not clear on that,” Jessica asked.

“The Tree of Azathoth told me that I needed to awaken the Dreaming King or keep him asleep,” I replied. “That it was the purpose I sought.”

“The Tree of Azathoth,” Jessica said.

“Yes, it’s a giant tree made of dead bodies and is apparently a god or the avatar of Nyarlathotep,” I replied. “It was made by the Dunwych people. A man who hated me put me in touch with it in hopes of it destroying me.”

Jessica stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “Is there any way, shape, or form that explanation would make sense with more context?”

“Honestly?” I replied. “Not really.”

“You were pretty desperate in the Wasteland, weren’t you?” Jessica asked, pulling out a set of keys and opening a thick metal door.

“Yes,” I replied. “I wasn’t really too concerned whether Mister Death killed me or saved me.”

“You did kill his daughter,” Jessica said, pausing with her key in the door.

“What’s wrong? Is it stuck?” I asked.

“No,” Jessica said, frowning. “It’s just I had no idea who Mister Death was a second ago and now I do. I remember him, Katryn, and the Dunwych tribe.”

I stared at her. “Interesting.”

“If by interesting you mean terrifying,” Jessica said, her voice hollow. “I don’t know where I came from, Booth. It’s always bothered me, and all I know is that I’m meant to be here with you. That scares me because it means I’m not in control of my own destiny.”

“None of us are in control of our destinies,” I replied. “That’s why they call it destiny. We are all conceived in this reality without our consent, forced into confusing ignorant life, and obliged to navigate powers far

beyond us until we finally have our existences cut short by the entropic powers of time. The only exceptions are the gods and gods above them, who I almost pity lacking such finality."

Jessica looked up from the door and stared at me. "Jesus, I'd forgotten how fucking up your own ass you are all the time."

"Well excuse me all to hell." I frowned. "Also, did you always swear this much?"

"Fuck you," Jessica said, stopping jiggling the keys in the door and pulling out a cigarette to light.

"I'll take that as a yes," I said, frowning.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Jessica asked. "Booth hated it."

"I can't imagine why," I replied.

"I just need a moment," Jessica shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, it's wonderful to see you, but this is a pretty big mental adjustment for me."

"You don't say," I said, sarcastically.

Jessica glared. "Do you take anything seriously?"

"Humor is staring in the face of death and knowing there's not a damn thing you can do about it," I replied. "So, yes, I take everything seriously. I've just accepted that I'm the mouse of cosmic cats playing with their toy."

Jessica smirked as if I'd said something amusing. "Funny you should mention cats. Okay, Booth, I won't try and get you out of town. Not that I'm sure there's much out of town. There's here, Arabian Nights world, some places straight out of the Hyborian Age, and lands that just get plain weird. The City is pretty much it for civilized lands and that's with a questionable definition of the world civilized. I'll even try to sneak you onto your son's movie lot. However, I need to take care of the case I'm currently working on. It takes precedence."

"Even if your entire pocket reality is threatened?" I asked, remembering the implications of the Tree.

"It involves kids," Jessica said, as if that was the finality of it. Which it was.

"Ah, yes, kids," I said, remembering the final desperate mission of Gamma Squadron that had been motivated by an ultimately futile desire to save some innocents from Alan Ward's mad plan. I had to wonder if he had been wiser than he'd first appeared. Were the children he'd sacrificed to the dream god Hypnos here somewhere, living their lives free from sin and

horror? Or had he simply been yet another madman like I'd taken him to be?

"Yeah, kids," Jessica said, continuing to jiggle the keys. "They change everything. Dammit, I can't get this door open."

"Let me try," I said, taking over.

"Of course, John," Jessica muttered. "Because I can't figure out a fucking door."

The door immediately opened for me. Weirdly, I could have sworn the key in the hole had turned silver in the light of the sun above.

"Goddammit," Jessica replied.

I shrugged and walked inside.

Only to be swallowed by the same darkness that had flown from Mister Death's opened throat.

Chapter Seven

I found myself in the dying hours of my Earth.

It was interesting to see how I'd returned to my world either hours later—or years—but in that time, the finality of my home's destruction had been reached. I saw the world had been torn apart and it would have been a kindness were it to simply be reduced to cosmic dust like was inevitable for all living things.

No, instead, the time and space around the Wasteland was shredded like old, crumbled paper. There were rifts to the past spread throughout, some that I recognized and some that I did not. Time was folding in on itself like a piece of paper origami and would soon cease to exist. If such a concept made any sense at all when it seemed that all of time was about to cease to exist from beginning to end.

I could see my corpse on the ground for the second time "today", for lack of a better frame of temporal reference. It was a blasted, beaten skeleton of bleached bones covered with alien matter rotting in the entropy of the world's decay. The dust and ruins of the Dunwych's last tribal settlement all around me.

My physical body had perished here—at least if I believed this to be a literal representation of reality—and I was now an astral being floating through the celestial void of the Dreamland. Then again, physical matter and thought were not so far removed these days. If nothing else, being a living dream in this place prevented me from dying from what I suspected was no environment a human or even Great Old One could survive.

Perhaps the most terrifying part—and what I hesitated to mention until this moment—was the presence of Yog-Sothoth. The Key and the Gate. One of two gods greater than even Nyarlathotep alongside Azathoth, assuming there was a meaningful distinction to make between the three.

The living chaos of everything everywhere all at once manifested itself as orange protoplasmic goo that bubbled out of the cracks of reality, merging, and splitting with raw reaction. A part of me believed I was seeing the spawn of new universes, or at least galaxies, that would go off to create life as willed by the obscene yet omnipresent patriarch before me.

Yog-Sothoth did not notice me, any more than I noted the cells in my own body, but I couldn't help but stand in trembling awe of the sight before

me. A part of me wanted to lay down and die, for the final time in a series of deaths that stretched back who knew how long, just because it struck me as improper that I might outlive my once grandiose homeland. The Esoteric East, like the Wild West, was no more and gone were the spiraling mountains and endless ashen deserts that had forged me into what I was.

Yet if there was no Wasteland, was there truly a John Henry Booth? The stark lawless emptiness had been a greater forge of my identity than the insular hate-filled New Arkhamites had ever been. It was pointless to speculate on such things, especially if I was a ghost or shade rather than a living man, but the thought refused to leave me. That was when I saw other Booths standing around the cracks. It was an unsettling experience, bizarre as such a thing to say may be given the other things around me, but I recognized each and every one of them. They were my roads less travelled, some wildly divergent, and others all too familiar.

It was my Dreaming City counterpart that drew me in the most, though, perhaps for obvious reasons. I walked to him past the rapidly disintegrating remains of my world and reached out, grabbing him by the lapel of his trench coat only for him to reach out himself. Whatever warning or message from beyond he tried to impart, though, was lost in the sound of his memories bleeding into mine.

Gunfire streamed over my head as I took refuge behind a wooden crate. The obese, thick-necked, and scaly goons of the Marsh family were unloading seemingly an entire armory's worth of bullets in our general direction. The warehouse district of the City was one of its most dangerous parts at night, but this was closer to a war zone.

"*You know, John, I think this might be a trap,*" *Jessica said, taking cover beside me.*

"*You don't say!*" *I said, peering around one of the crates and managing to plug one of the hybrids in the chest before he let out a bone-chilling death cry.*

"*This is why you never should have trusted that two-timing scheming whoreson,*" *Mercury said, dressed in black skirt and blouse, while keeping her hands tightly clenched around a glowing wooden wand.*

She was a significantly shorter woman than Jessica and quite a bit more feminine with Asiatic features, seemingly naturally red hair, and freckles on her face. Seeing her in the other John's memories was a blast from the past and reminded me of the ache of losing her.

“Takes one to know one,” Jessica muttered.

“Go back to hell, ya goddamned zombie tulpa,” *Mercury snapped, using insults I honestly wasn’t sure about.*

“I don’t think August was the one to betray us here,” I said, barely able to speak over the gunfire.

The four of us had planned to come down here to investigate a human trafficking ring the Deep Ones were managing.

Officially, they were supposed to be using their strange connection to other worlds via the ocean to smuggle in more refugees from the dying communities of my Earth. Instead, they were taking the ones they didn’t intend to use as breeding stock to be food for the men of Leng and their moon-beast masters.

Ezekiel King, the head of the yellow-tagged King gang, had given us a tip to head down and catch the Deep Ones right in the act. What had hopefully been a chance to rescue some of the refugees and expose the crooked plot had turned into a lengthy gunfight that had already killed a couple of our backup men. August was conspicuously absent, and without his magic to back up Mercury’s, we were, in simple terms, screwed.

“Who gives a shit!” Jessica shouted, reloading. “Of all the times to leave my shotgun in the car. Are you even doing anything with that wand, Mercury, or just giving yourself a rub?”

Mercury glared, her face covered in sweat and exhaustion before she leaned her head to one side. “I’m keeping them *at bay!”*

Despite the hail of gunfire still coming at me, one of the bullets knocking off my fedora, I. followed her motion. It led to the blackish, fetid waters of the City Bay underneath the pier.

I’d lost most of my supernatural senses when I’d first come to this strange, wonderful, and terrible place, but could still sense a few things beyond the sight of Earthly men. Among that was the presence of true Deep Ones in all their amphibian ichthyoid glory.

I could not say how many of the Deep One Pure Bloods had gathered around us but by the number of bubbles and movements, I’d guess the number to be in the dozens. All that was keeping them at bay was Mercury’s black magic, which was not aided by any conjunction or sacrifice that might strengthen it.

“Dammit,” I muttered, firing the last of the shots from my pistol. I had more ammunition, but I needed to change the nature of the game if I was to

walk away from this alive. I'd never particularly cared whether I lived or died, not since I'd become what I was, but it wasn't just me in this shootout. The signs of what I'd seen done to the slaves traded by these Deep Ones was enough to make me believe we should keep a bullet for ourselves.

Instead, I pulled out a long silver round marked with the brand of Yad-Thoth. I'd made the bullet myself and it was one of the few signs of the true magic that I possessed. Placing it in my revolver and spinning the chamber, I took aim at a crate hanging over the heads of the hybrids still shooting at us. The bullet fired and once it struck, a terrible silver miasma poured out like living mercury. It was a Silver Nightmare, an animal-based thing from a far distant world that had no place here, and yet unscrupulous magicians —like myself—were willing to use it like a living bomb.

I turned away from the sight of the Silver Nightmare forcing its way into the throats, eyes, and other orifices of the hybrids as the creature started tearing its way free. It was an awful and nightmarish way to die but, nevertheless, managed to buy us some valuable time. A good half of the goons were dead by the time the Silver Nightmare finished its feasting before dragging a bisected corpse off with it back to distant Elysia.

"Away from the wharf!" I shouted, running out from behind the crate and shooting wildly to keep the remaining hybrids away. As much as I wanted to go into the warehouse and try to rescue what I couldn't help but imagine were hundreds of starving and confused refugees, the simple fact was there nothing waiting staying here but an epitaph.

I told myself I'd come back with reinforcements, but the police were under the control of the Knights of Arkham and the only kind of people they cared about coming from the Dying Earth were ones who looked just like them. They knew there was something "wrong" with me and even my former friends among them avoided me like the plague. The Kings might be willing to loan some men but only if I figured out how to make a percentage for them. More likely, I'd come back and find the warehouses empty and whatever fate they'd been set for sealed.

So be it.

Failure trying to do the right thing was as close a companion as anyone else in my history, be they cheap bathtub gin or the arms of women who didn't mind lying with a monster in human skin for the night. I cursed myself as I plugged another Deep One in the heart while another unloaded into my trench coat with a Thompson machine gun. Much to his surprise,

the bullets bounced against it like rain drops. That allowed me to shoot him three times in the chest and send the rest of the hybrids fleeing.

"You owe me for that coat, John!" Mercury said, coming up beside me as the three of us went for our still-running car.

"How many lives went into that bit of protection?" I asked, taunting her.

Jessica picked up the dead hybrid's Thompson and fired into the night, hopefully covering our escape.

"Less than it was worth and no one who will be missed," Mercury snapped, always defensive about the costs of magic. "Also, don't let any more hit you. There's a limit to how much magic I can weave into one sigil."

Unfortunately, before we reached our green electric Hudson Super Six, the sound of a conch horn was heard that made me nauseous from inside out. It was a single note played on a blasphemous instrument that echoed not just through the Dreamlands but other realms entirely and caused a trickle of blood to come out of my ears and nose. Human or not, no being alive should have heard it let alone what it summoned.

Out from beneath the wooden boards of the wharf shot forth horrific black tendrils made of an unearthly plasma. Eyes, mouths, and sickening suction-cup-like folds were visible throughout the thing that could imitate any life on Earth or other realities but never well. I saw the Deep One Pure Bloods at the other end of the wharf, naked and chortling as they saw their nightmarish slave emerge from below.

A shoggoth.

I had much sympathy for the product of the Elder Things' depraved science for they had been brought into a painful horrific life as eternally abused slave labor. Empathy-less intellectuals from New Miskatonic University or Arkham's upper crust sympathized more with the slave masters than their slaves, speaking of the great tragedy when the intellectual immortal race had been overthrown by their less-than-civilized creations.

I was not one of them.

Unfortunately, for all the power of the shoggoths, they were still subject to the same spells that bound them under their creators. The Deep Ones, serpent men, ghouls, and even insane humans had all laid claim to beings with minds infinitely vaster than their own. I'd freed a city of shoggoths once, but the price had been them exterminating every ghoul served by them

in the process. Men, women, and children regardless of their humanity or lack thereof.

"John!" Mercury shouted, trying to hold it back with her wand, only for it to swat it out of her hand as a black smooth tendril wrapped around her waist.

I struggled to think of something, anything, to do as I was grabbed by the foot as well. I was lifted into the sky and knew my remaining moments on this world would be measured in seconds rather than years. I tried to scream out a warning to Jessica, but she just emptied the Thompson machine gun's contents into the shoggoth's oily black body, regardless of the fact it could no more harm it than the bullets against my coat's magic sigil that was already drained away by the shoggoth's power.

My imminent death was averted as both Mercury and I fell to the ground, the shoggoth slithering around us and Jessica as if we didn't exist, only to start tearing into Deep One Pure Bloods instead. A shoggoth needed no more food than the raw radiation of the cosmos, but it nevertheless swallowed bones and rent flesh before sliding back into the darkness.

I had no idea what the source of our salvation was, but my eyes briefly went to a glowing figure standing off to the side. I could not make out his face, if he even had one, but that he was made of a nimbus of light that put me in the mind of the Silver Nightmare. He was there only for a second before fading away.

The Dreaming King.

The shared memory between me and the now-deceased Detective Booth ended, and I found myself looking into his eyes. "The Dreaming King was your patron?"

The other Booth shook his head, his body gradually decaying as I saw bullets appear across his face and torso in ways that an undertaker had struggled hard to overcome. The undead version of myself placed his rotting hand on the side of my forehead and drew another memory out.

This time, from my mind.

The next memory was one that I wish I could forget, but made me sick every time I thought about it. I pitied the other Booth because if he had not experienced this terrible memory, he'd been lucky. If he had then it was a violation to force him to relive it. Just as it was to me.

We were once more in the Eastern Wasteland, the edge of the Great Barrier Desert, with the sun burning high in the sky over a once grandiose

land that had been transformed into cracked, ashen emptiness.

Gamma Squadron was riding together in a battered composite jeep for what was meant to be a routine visit to Fort Bloch. It was the furthest reach of New Arkham's territory, but widely considered to be safer than the capital itself. The Great Barrier Desert was thought to be empty of all life, a tomb for a long dead world, and less threatening than the mutant-filled Wastelands farther to the north.

"And then Booth goes, 'You idiot! When you're threatening someone with Russian Roulette, you remove the other bullets first!' Which I found to be hilarious," Joseph Stephens said, sitting in the passenger side of the jeep as I drove. A blond-haired, blue-eyed man's man, he had a short stubbly beard and was deeply amused with himself.

"Yes, because that was hilarious," I replied, sighing.

"I mean, it really was," Stephens said.

"We should focus on business," Jerimiah "Jimmy" Schmidt responded, adjusting his glasses. He was as black as me, though built more like a scholar than a wall. Jessica was sitting in the back, significantly younger but almost unchanged in appearance.

"Ain't no business worth discussing," Stephens replied. "We just have to go shake down some villagers for their tithes and make sure no one is hording food. It's regular Army work and beneath us as Rangers."

"I hate to agree with him," I replied, taking a deep breath. "But I agree. The Dunwych are expanding their borders and have been sending their scouts deeper into our territory. We should be following up on that."

"Everyone has to take a vacation, Booth," Jessica said. "I'm just going to be happy to spend some time with my boys."

"Yeah, your husband is like a gardener out here, isn't he?" Stephens asked.

"Agricultural specialist," Jessica replied.

"What I said," Stephens said. "At least he's going to be having a good time while the rest of us—"

Stephens didn't get to finish his sentence because the light that appeared in the distance was blinding and I instinctively swerved our jeep to turn away from it, perhaps saving us all from being permanently blinded. The sound that radiated outward was horrific, a deep unnatural thrumming that caused my guts to twist as it vibrated me from the inside out. The jeep overturned and skidded across the sands.

What passed over us was something that human eyes were not meant to articulate and if you saw it as brilliant neon purple, brilliant bioluminescent green, or pulsating gamboge then you should count yourself lucky. Those were the colors the others in my group used to describe the Color out of Space. Stephens, perhaps, was the luckiest for his mind simply did not see anything at all—not even a hole—in the space that moved around us. His mind edited out the memory and replaced it with a simple awareness of what could not be.

Unaware that I was a thing of similar unnaturalness, I saw the Color for what it was. It was a pattern of its own reality superimposed upon us and contained mutually contradictory patterns of the prismatic spectrum before exploding into brilliances that could not be seen anywhere but the Dreamlands.

All of us passed out as only the fact we'd been underneath a hilly dune—or perhaps the creature had already had its "fill"—spared us. When I awoke hours later, my mouth parched and eyes still adjusting to alien light, I'd seen Stephens still passed out while Jimmy foamed at the mouth, trapped in some horrid nightmare that would take days to end. Jessica was missing and I crawled out of the car's shattered remains to follow her trail. She was standing on top of the dune and staring at Fort Bloch.

Except Fort Block was not there anymore.

Nor was her husband.

Nor were her children.

There was only a mile-long lake of glass.

Crackling with otherworldly lightning that shot forth to the sky instead of the reverse.

Jessica stared at the sight. Her eyes were empty of even grief.

Only madness remained.

And hate.

"She died this day," a whisper spoke in my mind from the same luminescent figure from this dream. "The Jessica you knew. But you always dreamed she would recover. Always brought her back. It would have been kinder to let her go."

"Who are you?" I asked, speaking despite the fact we were in a memory.

"She was born from a wish," the Dreaming King replied, ignoring my question. "Yours."

Chapter Eight

I awoke to the sound of a saxophone playing. It was a smooth, jazzy noise and reminded me of several old vinyl records that had managed to stand the test of time in New Arkham before time had consumed even them.

I opened my eyes and turned my head to see a redheaded woman playing the aforementioned instrument beside me. She had pale, white skin with freckles, a black sweater, and a white blouse topped with a little black beret on her head. She was wearing a white dress that was practical with black panty hose that completed her monochromatic look. It took me a second to recognize her because she looked simultaneously the same but different. Yet another case of person wearing the face of someone familiar yet completely new.

The pair of us were in an apartment/office combination with a couch, coffee table, and paper-covered desk, with a Christmas tree in a corner. I was lying on the couch. There were several bookshelves spread throughout the room, and there was a kitchenette. The room had glass windows overlooking the city, though they were presently covered with blinds blotting out most of the fading daylight. It was a comfortable looking place that would have been the height of luxury back in my world.

I was no longer wearing my leathers and Stetson, which bothered me as someone had to have changed me in my sleep. Instead, I had been put into beige pants, a cotton button-down shirt, and a tie loose around my neck. A fedora was to the side of my head on the arm of the couch. I was now dressed like the other Booth and felt a peculiar need to monologue—not that I'd ever had much difficulty being compelled to do so.

"Jackie, is that you?" I asked, unsure if I was still dreaming or not.

The woman, Jackie Howard or at least a version of her, stopped playing her saxophone and turned to a sheet music stand where she placed her instrument.

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you up? I was practicing 'Harlem Nocturne' and I think I've almost got it."

"Uh huh," I said, sitting up.

"Are you okay?" Jackie asked.

"You mean for a dead man?" I asked, unsure how to feel about this Jackie Howard.

I'd adopted Jackie almost twenty years ago when she was a young ghoul-human hybrid whose adoptive father had been murdered. The villages of Scrapyard had allowed her to be taken by slavers in hopes of getting rid of her. I'd watched her grow up into a woman, have a child of her own, and then the slow but inexorable transformation into a pure-blooded member of their race.

The clawing fear I'd had for my own children had been something I'd had decades to prepare for with Jackie and I'd thought I'd been reasonably accepting of it. Yet, when the call of dark and chthonic Earth had lured Jackie away from me, it had still been heartbreaking. To see her now, more human than she'd ever looked even as a child, was a confusing and painful experience that I could not bring myself to enjoy.

"Are you dead?" Jackie asked. "You look pretty alive to me."

"Looks can be deceiving," I said, staring forward. "I just had a dream of the end of the world, the memories of a dead man, and a Color murdering an entire city. Three horrifying impossible things."

"You aren't trying hard enough," Jackie replied. "I try and do as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

I stared at her, noting her *Alice in Wonderland* quote. "Everyone seems unusually literate here in the City."

"You included, John," Jackie said, arcing her head to one of the bookshelves.

Detective John Henry Booth seemed to have possessed a good-sized personal library with at least fifty or sixty volumes. It was a treasure trove in the Wasteland but a man's nightly entertainment here. There was *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, *I, The Jury*, and several other titles I didn't recognize. Looking at them, I could remember the plots even though I'd never read any of them. Another gift from the other man who shared my face.

Perhaps that was the secret of all Booths across reality. We envisioned ourselves on classic lines of fiction to cope with a world that fundamentally lacked narrative. In real life, there was no point to anything one did and then you died. However, the ability to see narratives and points to reality was perhaps humanity's most blessed erroneous gift. It might even be a fundamental part of the structure of this pocket universe I'd found myself in.

"You've got that look on your face," Jackie said.

“Pardon?” I asked, looking up.

“That look of overthinking things,” Jackie said, smirking. “You’ve always had it.”

“I suppose your John had it,” I replied.

“Are you from the Wasteland?” Jackie asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“New Arkham?” Jackie asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“We met in Scrapyard?” Jackie asked.

I nodded.

“Then you could be my John,” Jackie said, surprising me. “The Dreamlands is the nexus between all realities and the ghouls are seasoned travelers of it. Whenever a reality is about to collapse, they’re always the first ones to flee. Sort of like dolphins.”

“Dolphins.” I stared at her.

“Oh sorry,” Jackie replied. “It’s a reference to a very funny book about the end of the world. It happens because a bunch of aliens want to build an interstellar bypass and don’t care that it will kill billions.”

“Sounds like a real laugh riot,” I said, dryly.

“It is!” Jackie said, pausing. “I mean, probably a bit soon with our world having been destroyed and all but—”

I interrupted her. “You’re looking…well.”

“You mean not like a hairless, naked, bipedal dogman?” Jackie asked.

“That too,” I replied.

Ghouls were a strange mix of man, canine, and some rubbery skinned creature that had no earthly antecedent. They were the inspiration for the Fair Folk, werewolves, ghouls obviously, and half a dozen other supernatural races mankind told stories regarding around the campfire but never really approached the truth of until the Rising drove many to the surface.

When I’d last seen Jackie, she’d already begun the transformation and more resembled a beast than a person despite retaining all of her higher intellect. Still, having been raised among humans, or whatever the hell you’d call me, it was something she was ashamed of. Her son had also begun the transformation, though he’d still had many more years to pretend at being a human. Baby John, a name he’d grown to hate for obvious

reasons as a teenager, had still gone with her in hopes of finding a refuge from the end of the world.

“You’ll find most of the people here use glamours,” Jackie replied.

“Glamours,” I replied. “You mean illusions.”

Jackie shrugged. “I’m not sure if it’s an illusion if you can touch, taste, and smell it. Illusions in the Dreamlands are more like an additional layer of reality. You can choose to live as a mortal by casting the right spell here. It costs most of my paycheck, but I get to live as a red-blooded woman.”

“And this is popular?” I asked, surprised. I would have thought ghouls and other demihumans would have enjoyed living as they were.

“More than you’d imagine,” Jackie said, frowning. “Mind you, it’s not really a choice. The City demands it.”

“Demands it?” I asked. “Is the city alive?”

It wasn’t as strange a question as, well, how utterly batshit it sounded. We were in the Dreamlands after all and everything was made of thought here. I’d just spent the day talking with a living a tree so why shouldn’t the city itself be alive?

“Not as far as I now,” Jackie replied. “However, whoever is behind it has a way of making his presence known. He prefers us all to look like humans. One follows the rules or one faces the penalties.”

I nodded. “The Dreaming King.”

“One name for him,” Jackie nodded. “I understand you’re looking for him.”

“So it seems,” I replied, standing up off the couch. “I’m not sure if I didn’t make a mistake seeking this place out. It feels like I may have brought the attention of darker forces to a place that seemed previously devoid of them.”

“I wouldn’t be so confidant of that, John,” Jackie replied. “Red Hook here has all the problems of a major city and the horrors beneath. It’s like Kingsport was in the final days before the Arkham takeover.”

“Red Hook?” I asked.

Jackie nodded. “The City is made of parts of a dozen other Pre-Rising cities. I’d explain it but any explanation would sound like nonsense that only a madman would understand. It is what the City was dreamed to be.”

“That’s not nonsense,” I replied. “Which I suppose makes me the madman.”

Jackie smiled. “I’ve missed you, John.”

I looked down at the ground, unsure if I could bring myself to acknowledge her as the same one I'd known for so many years. There was something about this world that was too perfect, despite its myriad flaws, and I couldn't quite bring myself to believe in it. Yet, I also couldn't break the heart of this Jackie, false or real.

"I have missed you too, Jackie," I said, taking a deep breath and giving her an awkward hug.

"We should probably stop this," Jackie said. "You're not a hugger."
I pulled away my hand. "Yes. I agree. Do you know where Jessica is? Also, where my hat and coat are?"

"You really want that hat and coat back?" Jackie asked. "The ones that smell like the trail of Cthulhu?"

"Yes," I said, dryly.

"Check the incinerator," Jackie said.

I grimaced. "I was afraid of that."

"Well, the incinerator didn't start bellowing the wails of the damned so at least it wasn't like some of your clothes," Jackie replied. "As for Jessica, she's been gone a couple of hours. You passed out and after I got you changed, she couldn't delay any further and went into the Warrens."

"The Warrens," I said.

"Ghoultown," Jackie said, gesturing over to the desk. "She's after those missing kits."

"Kits," I said, surprised by her use of the word.

"Yes," Jackie said.

"And the police aren't interested in finding them?" I asked, surprised at that level of disinterest.

"Let's just say the cops in this town have very particular ideas of what qualifies as a child or not," Jackie said.

Heading over to the desk, I noted that there was a large number of black and white pictures on the desk, as well as addresses. I also saw a map spread out across the table, which included several marked locations. One peculiar element of the pictures, though, was the fact they were all of cats. Young felines of varying degrees of adorability, but most looking somewhat worn out.

I was pondering what this meant when a black American shorthair cat jumped on the desk and stared at me.

I stared back at it. "Shoo. I'm looking at these files."

The cat, in crisp New England English, responded, “Yeah, I can tell that, jackass.”

I blinked, opened my mouth, then sighed. “Of course, the cats talk. Why the fuck not?”

“Well, you’re a monkey who talks, so I don’t see where you get off having airs,” the cat responded.

“Are you a client or another one of Booth’s associates?”

“Please, as if I’d ever have anything to do with a penny-ante affair like this,” the cat replied. “I’m here strictly as a favor to my dog.”

“Your dog,” I replied.

The cat looked back at Jackie. “Here girl, tsk-tsk-tsk. Come here, girl!”

Jackie stared at him. “Blackman, that wasn’t funny the first few hundred times you did it.”

“Isn’t she cute?” Blackman asked. “Anyway, cats, dogs, and humans all dream. So, we can all communicate here.”

“Fascinating,” I said, lying. “And your name is Blackman?”

“Observant, aren’t we?” Blackman said.

“Uh huh,” I said, staring down at the photos on the desk. “So, if I’m to understand this, a bunch of young cats have been kidnapped.”

“Indeed,” Blackman said. “Normally we cats like to take care of this sort of thing ourselves, but the killer is able to move through this world and the surrounding ones. It also crosses several territories that aren’t especially cat friendly.”

“Killer?” I asked. “It’s not a—”

“I swear if you say catnapper, I will claw your leg off,” Blackman said.

I didn’t finish that sentence. “It’s a killer, huh?”

“An eater of cats, a zoog,” Blackman said.

“A zoog,” I said.

“Ancient enemies of felines in the Dreamlands,” Jackie said, scooping up the cat and cuddling it. “They look like long-eared, tentacled possums, except they’re the size of men.”

“Can you imagine a more hideous alien thing?” Blackman said. “Aside from humans, I mean.”

I’d seen many variations on humans and even more on more surreal things. That had been in the physical world, let alone a reality where thought shaped matter. Still, I’d heard of zoogs before. Some of the stranger travelers to New Ulthar had spoken of creatures preying on young cats and

giant cats preying on them. New Ulthar had a sacred law to never harm a feline and I'd never questioned it. Now I had a reason why. Don't harm a thing that can dream because it is almost certainly going to harm you back.

"Yes," I said, dryly. "And Jessica is after this thing?"

"Yeah," Jackie said, looking unhappy about it. "She should have backup going down into the tunnels. Unfortunately, we're kind of lacking that these days."

I thought about the dream—within a dream (?)—I'd just had shooting it out with the Marsh family. Looking through the photos, I saw a hand-drawn map of the city's sewer system and steam tunnels. Also, some indications of natural caves beneath. It wasn't a lot to go on and perhaps suicidal given I didn't know this place, but I wasn't about to leave her alone.

"I'm going to go look for her," I replied. "Where's my gun?"

Jackie nodded her head to the desk's right drawer. Opening it up, I was momentarily taken back by a photograph of my son, Gabriel. He was standing there, white-haired and albino skin with mixed racial features. His demeanor was as far from my own as humanly possible, nervous and gaunt with eyes that seemed to have stared deeply into the abyss before carrying some of it out. He dressed like a college professor going to a party with a dinner jacket and black pants with a pocket watch visibly hanging out of one pocket.

There were other photos present including one of the entire detective agency: Jessica, Jackie, Mercury, August, the cat, and myself. It seemed to be a happier time, but there was a bloodstain formed into fingerprints on the edge that hinted even those times were not particularly happy. A black book of women's names troubled me because it either indicated Detective Booth was a cheating cad or his primary customers were anxious wives. Mercury's Gift was also present, as was a stone with a strange glyph on it that I instinctively pocketed. Several handcrafted gold and silver bullets were also things I shoved into my coat, just in case. Actual case books were underneath the desk drawer, and I made a note to read them.

"Are you sure you want to go?" Jackie asked.

"Of course, he does," Blackman said. "He's a Booth. They're as predictable as rain."

"How many have you known?" I asked the question that had been hanging in my mind for some time.

“Too many,” Blackman said, sounding briefly like the Crawling Chaos. “They die so quickly.”

Chapter Nine

I sat in the back of Jackie's car, a smaller more compact version of Jessica's, and spent that time reading over Detective Booth's past cases while she drove me to the location where Jessica was last scene. I continued to duck any time I saw a glimpse of police vehicles, though it was a cramped fit as this vehicle wasn't made for a man of my height. Blackman sat in the passenger side of the car, lording over everyone and everything as only a feline could.

The City was a very different beast at night, and I couldn't help but be impressed by the amount of lights spreading throughout the night. Most of them were traditional glowing golden orbs of light but others were strange green flames and others twinkling colored lights held in odd crystalline torches. Apparently, this was related to the city celebrating the Winter holidays despite few having an affection for the Abrahamic faiths. The excess of light was both off-putting and striking. Electricity was something valued heavily in the few cities that had remained on Earth, so it was fascinating to see it wasted on casual use here in the Republic of Carter.

"Enjoying your reading?" Jackie asked.

"It reads like bad pulp fiction," I said, amused. "Prostitutes, gambling, bribery, adultery, murder, and slavery. Usually, there's the hint of the supernatural but a wife beating her husband nightly doesn't change if she's a Deep One or not. Nor does a priest abusing children if he's a priest of Shub-Niggurath or not."

"Humans are the only people who can do evil," Jackie said, unwittingly paraphrasing me (or perhaps wittingly). I didn't know what she and the other Book had talked about. "Everything else is just hungry or indifferent."

"Evil is a human construct," Blackman replied, mostly having overcome my inherent confusion at a talking cat. "Everything else in the world knows that the strong do what they want while the weak perish. It requires creatures with an inherent overvalue of their own self-importance like mankind to be offended by this simple truism."

"Unlike cats," Jackie said.

"Yes, we're the most important beings in the cosmos so we can't be wrong," Blackman said.

Jackie rolled her eyes. “You did whatever you could around here. You ruffled a lot of feathers. Esoteric Order of Dagon, the Cult of Starry Wisdom, Church of the Yellow Sign, Knights of Arkham—”

“All of those sound silly,” I replied. “But I suppose the sillier the title, the more people take it seriously.”

“Names have power here,” Jackie muttered. “Enough that people started believing in you too.”

“That was their mistake,” I muttered.

“Depends,” Jackie replied. “If only human beings can do evil, doesn’t that mean only humans can do *good*?”

“One man’s good is another man’s evil,” I replied, crossing my arms.

There were some questionable choices in Detective Booth’s casebooks. Guilty people who’d been let off for murders, thefts, and other crimes simply because he hadn’t liked the people they’d been involved with. The law seemed a very fragile gossamer web over a tidal wave of inequities and injustices. On the other hand, I doubted I would have done much different. Which was a disquieting thought if Nyarlathotep was the master of this tiny universe. I was thoroughly replaceable, like a new handle for a broken hammer. Not even death was freedom from the machinations of the Great Old Ones and the Other Gods above them.

“The only person who matters in that sort of opinion is yourself,” Blackman the cat said. “What does another man’s good or evil count when every man or woman’s universe is their own private domicile?”

“That sounds very much like the opinion of a cat,” I replied.

“Or a god’s,” Blackman replied.

“Same difference,” Jackie said.

Eventually, Jackie brought the car to a large train tunnel extending underground with its railway ending in iron blocks. Graffiti of several languages was written on the white stone of the exterior, some of it legible enough to read their obscene meanings. Not everything in the city was supernatural in meaning and tagging for its own sake was something that had managed to survive right until the end of my world.

“Here we are,” Jackie said, bringing the car to a stop next to the edge of the tunnel entrance.

“This is the entrance to Ghoultown?” I asked.

“Yep,” Jackie said. “One of them at least. There were plans to make a subway system for the city but the ghouls took over everything and

demanded tribute to use their tunnels. The city council refused."

"Ah," I replied. "Not very smart of them."

"No kidding," Jackie said. "Hordes of rats, backflowing sewage, and missing children dragged down to the lower depths eventually convinced them to do a tribute system."

"Tribute?" I asked.

"Corpses," Jackie said. "Every unclaimed corpse in town and a lot of donated ones are dropped down here, wrapped in bedsheets."

I nodded. Similar kinds of arrangements had been made in Scrapyard despite the bigotry and xenophobia they'd displayed toward hybrids like her.

"What a waste of good corpses," Blackman said, dryly.

"The ghouls do keep the sewers and drains working at least," Jackie said. "They might be willing to do more but the Knights of Arkham refuse."

"I see," I replied. "And Jessica went down here to look for the missing cats?"

"Yes," Jackie said. "A few hours ago. She should have been back by now. On the plus side, as long as she's got her Tear of Tsathoggua, the ghouls should leave her alone."

I nodded. "I picked up a similar rock from the desk."

"Good," Jackie said, taking a breath. "Now you just have to worry about all the hundreds of other horrible things down there in the dark."

"I'm not exactly helpless," I said, patting Mercury's Gift through my coat.

"Oh yes, a gun," Blackman replied, sarcastically. "Because that will certainly terrify the forces beyond."

"I'm not sure the City isn't the beyond itself," I muttered.

"Don't overestimate your ability to deal with things, Booth," Jackie said, referring to me by my last name instead of dad. "The City is kept from the worst of the supernatural by the Dreaming King's barriers and wards. An enforced sense of normality and sanity as a bulwark against the ephemeral that is absolute outside our little community's bubble."

"I have no idea what you just said," I replied.

"Shit is weird here but not nearly as weird as it gets outside the city," Blackman translated.

"Uh huh," I said, understanding that just fine.

“The Warrens underneath are a lot weirder,” Jackie said. “I just thought I’d warn you.”

“Jessica should have waited for me,” I said, opening the passenger car door and stepped out into the night just as a light rain began. The water tasted acidic and smoke-filled, which irritated me as only someone who depended on the rain for life could feel.

“Time is of the essence in kidnappings,” Jackie said, stepping out of the car. “Particularly when the suspects are known to eat cats. I would have gone with her but she wanted to make sure you were guarded while you were asleep.”

“I don’t need guarding,” I said, dryly.

Jackie unfurled an umbrella and picked up Blackman, carrying him around in place of a gun or other useful tool. Then again, for all I knew, a talking cat might be better than a pistol against the Things Below. Capital T, capital B.

“You died of gunfire, John.”

“Everyone has to die sometime,” I replied.

“That is a very stupid statement,” Blackman replied. “No one has to die unless they’re mortal and such is a condition everyone should be actively seeking a cure for. It’s only those too stupid or inept to find such a thing who should.”

“Are cats immortal?” I asked, half-curious about what sort of rules applied here.

“Only ones from Saturn,” the cat replied. “The rest of us reincarnate.”

I stared at the cat.

“What?” Blackman asked.

“I’m trying to tell if you’re joking,” I said, shaking my head.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Blackman asked, looking very much like an ordinary house cat that somehow had gained the power of speech.

“Do you have liquor in the City because I think I need to get loaded,” I replied.

“Yeah, but it’s illegal,” Jackie said.

I stared at her. “That’s the first genuinely horrifying thing anyone has said since I’ve got here and I’ve talked to a demon tree over my own corpse.”

Seriously, what the hell was wrong with this place?

“Alcohol has to be imported or made locally from fungus or kelp,” Jackie said. “So the majority of booze comes from the demihumans. Hence illegal.”

“Fungus,” I replied.

“You don’t see much grain around here, do you?” Jackie asked. “Let’s just say you’re going to get used to eating things that grow in the dark and are fed shit.”

“Just as long as they don’t talk,” I replied.

Jackie didn’t respond.

“They don’t talk, do they?” I asked.

“Not after being fermented,” Jackie said.

“I am rethinking leaving the City for another part of the Dreamland,” I muttered. “Is Narnia real?”

“Yeah, like they’d let you in Narnia,” Jackie muttered, surprising me as I wouldn’t have thought her familiar with it. Then again, the ghouls might have had far vaster libraries and knowledge of the human race than New Arkham’s expansive town library. “Also, I don’t know if the fungus talks. I’m just saying as a ghoul, I’m not particularly concerned about whether or not my food formerly talked or not. The circle of life.”

“Eat, die, get eaten, shit it out,” Blackman said. “We all end up the same compost unless you’re an immortal cat from Saturn.”

“Are you coming, Jackie?” I asked, looking over at my daughter—whether by my reality or another one’s it didn’t matter to me. I was potentially leading her into danger, and I couldn’t tell if it was the right decision or not.

“I’m not going to abandon you again,” Jackie said.

“You’ve never abandoned me, Jackie,” I replied.

“Yeah, I did, in the Wasteland.” Jackie looked down. “I left you to go be with my people, only once I was with them, I realized we didn’t have anything in common. Ghouls are the most human-like of all the immortal races and yet it was still like being in another time, place, and reality when dealing with them. You raised me to be too human. We could have been together, me and my son, Mercury, all of us, but we all went our separate ways.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied.

“Don’t be,” Jackie said. “It’s better to be human than a monster. However affable.”

“Ha!” Blackman said.

“Are you going to throw him at whatever’s down there?” I asked.

“Don’t tempt me,” Jackie said. “But Blackman has his own benefits. Especially if we’re going to be tracking down Jessica in those tunnels.”

I severely questioned that, but I wasn’t exactly an expert on any of the people here in this strange place either. “I’ll let you lead the way.”

Jackie nodded. “I suggest you also get the shotgun from the car. It may not be as effective as your pistol against certain things, but there are plenty of people down there that buckshot is effective against—and deterred by.”

“Are you armed?” I asked, opening the back, and seeing a pair of shotguns inside. There was also a rifle.

“I will be,” Jackie said. “I never learned the hang of sorcery like Mom.”

I thought of Mercury and the fact she’d—or at least some version of her—had ended up here and apparently gone off with yet another John. It sounded ridiculous, but I wasn’t sure by what standard I could measure that anymore. This City was the stuff dreams were made of, which was less a literary illusion than a statement of fact.

Handing Jackie her rifle and taking a shotgun for myself, Blackman jumped down on the ground while Jackie kept the umbrella with her free hand. Apparently, keeping the cat dry until we reached the tunnel was something that warranted not holding the weapon properly. Of course, wiser heads than me had long observed that cats were the owners in their relationship with humans.

Apparently with ghouls, too.

Our makeshift group descended into the tunnel and I immediately noticed we were going to be drenched in blackness the moment we descended into its depths. That was going to pose its own issues even if Jackie, as a true blooded ghoul, could see in the dark as if it was daytime.

“I have an electric torch if you need me to light it,” Jackie said. “It’ll announce our presence, though.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said, putting the shotgun on the ground and rubbing my hands together before whispering a minor guttural invocation not meant for human speech. A little will-o-wisp emerged from my hands and became a free-floating hand with a glowing ball inside it.

“What the hell is that?” Jackie asked, looking at it.

“A Hand of Glory,” I replied. “I don’t know much witchcraft, but Mercury made this for me as a symbol I can conjure with my mind. It’ll

illuminate the area for yourself and any friendlies but no one else. Perfect for thieving and ambushes."

"Huh," Jackie said. "I don't think that's how Hand of Glories are supposed to work."

I picked up the shotgun and shrugged. "If you say so."

We headed into the darkness of the abandoned train tunnel and I was immediately set upon edge. The place had the looks of a massive construction project that had been abandoned halfway through with old, dried blood on the wall, a few pitiful attempts to construct an Elder Sign, and roaches the size of man's fist.

"The ghouls live down here?" I asked.

"The ones who don't want to live with humans," Jackie said. "There's some humans down here as well."

"Humans?" I asked.

"There's always people more at home with the monsters than their fellow men," Jackie said. "Supposedly, there's ways of making humans into ghouls if they eat the right food and swear themselves to the right gods."

"Is that true?" I asked.

"Fuck no," Jackie responded. "Just another story about humans who want to escape the looming specter of old age and death. You're either born a ghoul or you're not."

"That doesn't mean some stories aren't true. Human blood has always been needed to refresh the inbred bloodlines of the Earth dwellers." Blackman walked beside us, surveying his surroundings with boredom. "The legends of the Fair Folk stealing away children in the night come from ghouls. Changelings are left in their place to gain new knowledge and eventually return to their kind. Very different from the zoogs who simply seek meals."

I could feel a hundred tiny eyes watching us from the shadows, looking through the eyes of the rats and vermin or simply staring at us from other realms that were invisible to the naked eye. They were not hostile for the simple fact we had not been attacked yet. At least, that was what I told myself.

I pulled the glyph-covered stone from my pocket and displayed the symbol of Tsathoggua, holding the shotgun with my arm. Presenting the stone seemed to have an immediate effect and I soon felt all of the viewing

eyes vanish. Whoever this god was, apparently his symbol was enough to open doors that might otherwise be closed. We had safe passage.

For now.

“This way,” Blackman said, jumping through a hole in the wall. “Jessica went down this hall a couple of hours ago.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Magic,” Blackman said.

Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer.

Chapter Ten

The journey through the cracked and ruined tunnels of the City's underworld was one that awakened inside me a claustrophobia I hadn't known I had, especially given I'd journeyed in much deeper caves investigating the Unimaginable Horror. However, the empty and cramped conditions as we passed through halfway completed passageways was something that crawled up my skin in ways I didn't quite fathom.

Perhaps it was the fact that I sensed danger everywhere around me but it never manifested itself or abated. The tension was worse than any actual monsters I might encounter here. Those, at least, could be fought or run away from. Or, if neither was possible, then death was a certainty. Instead, it was the ever-present anticipation that was driving me crazy. The light of the Hand of Glory only provided the barest illumination that distracted from the oppressive tight atmosphere. Even the air was driving me mad with a disgusting tinge of old rotted meat, grease, dust, and other unidentifiable smells assaulting the nostrils.

I didn't know if I'd find Jessica at the end of this tunnel, serving as the proverbial light, or if it would be a literal dead end. It was at that moment I realized the silence was getting to me as well since I was now thinking in weird metaphors and narrating my own actions. It less of a jump from my normal behavior than I was perhaps comfortable admitting but something I deeply hoped to avoid.

"You seem awfully certain it is a zoog," I said, ending the silence as we moved along the edge of a storm drain.

"*The* zoog," Blackman corrected. "He is the last of his kind. The Shadowwalker, the Stealer of Kits, and the Eater of Young."

"The Napper," Jackie said.

"Such a stupid name," Blackman said without a trace of irony.

"How did he become the last of his kind?" I asked.

"Simple, we killed the rest," Blackman said.

"Oh," I said, remembering I wasn't exactly dealing with a moralistic race. Every cat was a psychopath as humans labeled such things, as free and unbidden from good or evil as the Great Old Ones. They had their pets, slaves, and families—nothing else mattered. Any cat "owner" would tell you so.

“Randolph Carter created this city in 1927, though it wasn’t colonized really until 1947,” Blackman said, giving me some insight into the City’s history. “I’m referring to the common era calendar of your world, Booth, if that provides you some context.”

I’d complain about being condescended to, but I suspected all people who talked to cats had that problem.

“I’m familiar with that time keeping method.”

Honestly, it was a meaningless distinction. The Rising had disrupted the cause and flow of reality so that generations passed in one part of the world while others flowed like a trickle of molasses. Had twenty years passed since I’d confronted Alan Ward in his cursed temple or was that just how long it felt? Did it matter to mostly immortal beings?

“Good,” Blackman said. “Humans have no natural predators, just as they have no natural prey, a reflection, perhaps, of the insignificance of your race. It does, however, mean that men are often confused about the ancient age-old feuds between the species of the Dreamlands. Gugs and ghasts, ghouls and nightgaunts, flying polyps and yith, the Elder Things and the people of K’Tulu.”

“Cats and zoogs,” I said, doubting that most of those things were genetically encoded to be enemies versus culturally.

I didn’t know how chasing down a bunch of missing kittens related to my quest to find the Dreaming King or how any of this was relevant to my life. I’d seemingly stepped through the Looking Glass and gone from a dead and dying world into a vibrant—albeit crooked caricature—living one. The fact it seemingly came at the cost of stealing another Booth’s life was just the bizarre topping to the food I was consuming. Yet, the cats seemed very much alive and Jessica, dream or not, cared about helping them, so I saw no reason not to. I just hoped I wasn’t about to come across her corpse in the most bitter twist of fate imaginable.

“Precisely,” Blackman said. “Several cats assisted Randolph Carter on his quest for ascension. Though it went horribly wrong, it was a favor that was not forgotten. When the Dreaming King opened the City to countless races fleeing the Great Old Ones and their nightmares, cats were given a special place among the city’s ranks.”

“So, the Dreaming King *is* Randolph Carter,” I said, wanting to solve that particular puzzle sooner than later. I needed to find out who this Dreaming King was and how to locate him, even if I didn’t entirely trust the

guidance of who had set me on this path. All I knew is that if it wanted you to do something, the supernatural had very effective ways of enforcing your behavior.

“Possibly,” Blackman said, disappointing me. “The Dreaming King is a Great One, what you would call one of the small human-like gods of Earth. Bast, Nodens, Odin, the Nailed One, and so on. Powered by dreams and mortal faiths that sustain them in whatever Elysiums they build for themselves in the Dreamlands. The Great Ones are insignificant compared to the Great Old Ones and even more so to Nyarlathotep and his masters, but respectably powerful in their own way. Carter sought such knowledge for himself and almost achieved apotheosis.”

“Almost?” I asked, surprised. “I saw his life story in the theater.”

Blackman gave a sputter of indignant contempt, which was surprisingly cat-like yet recognizably human as well.

“Your son only told part of the story. Which is typical for humans when being paid. They love to drag things out if there’s more profit in it.”

“If you say so,” I said. I’d grown up in a society that barely used money since every part of our society was distributed by the military. I understood that this kind of distribution of wealth had been uncommon in America beforehand and even disdained.

“*The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* is meant to be a trilogy, or quartet, called the Dream Cycle. I think Gabriel is always changing his mind about how many movies is supposed to compromise it,” Jackie said, cheerfully. “He’s been having a helluva time making the sequels, though. Not everyone wants to hear the whole story of Randolph Carter’s life. *The Silver Key* has been tied up in production for a year.”

“How does Carter’s story end?” I asked.

“Poorly,” Blackman said. “Carter sought to become greater than the Great Ones and ascend to be something beyond them. Unfortunately, he sought the aid of the true God of Gods and Yog-Sothoth showed that enlightenment was a curse rather than a blessing. He ended up mad and trapped in a body of an alien from a long dead race with both of them struggling for control in perpetuity.”

“Sounds familiar,” I muttered, thinking of my own condition.

It made me wonder—my mind was going to some very strange places lately even by my standards—that this might be some sort of deranged hallucination drawn from my desires. That I had created this fantastic world

whole cloth as a chance to achieve a nonexistent redemption. Jessica, Jackie returned, a human-ish civilization thriving, and a quest to save everyone to keep my mind occupied. Maybe I wasn't in Nyarlathotep's or Randolph Carter's snow globe, but in a fish tank or dying dream of my own choosing.

"Yes, I thought you'd see some similarity," Blackman said, not knowing about my existential crisis. "The Dreaming King is either Carter after he's managed to reach an accord with his inhuman self, a future incarnation of Carter, or someone else entirely. Time and space mean nothing in the Dreamlands, so he could be from the far future, past, or something that never happened."

"None of which explains how you ended up wiping out the zoogs," I replied.

"He's just ashamed," Jackie said.

"I didn't know cats could be ashamed," I replied.

"I'm ashamed we didn't do it ourselves," Blackman said, approximating shame. "Cats do not rely on the help of others. Instead, we turned to the humans for help."

"You had the Knights of Arkham slaughter them all," I said, taking a guess.

Blackman didn't respond for a moment before his tail thrashed once from side to side.

"Yes. We called upon the favors from Randolph Carter's allies and spun tales of great gold, gemstones, and other wealth held by the zoogs. We also spun tales of horrible rites, evil deeds, and malignant plots by our ancient enemies."

"Justification for a massacre," I replied.

"Yes," Blackman replied. "Such a strange thing to need, but humans must feel there is some moral element to killing. Even when it is nonsense. In any case, almost all of them turned us down among the city fathers and priestesses, except for Franz Jermyn."

An image entered my head of an obese…no that wasn't the word, a solidly round three-hundred-and-fifty-pound man with a grotesque square face that was topped with a bald scalp. He had a long pair of mutton chops down the sides of his face and a thick but oddly positioned beard under his chin. His proportions were all off though not unbelievable, even *familiar* in some way, with a great white suit that he supplemented with a walking stick covered in a golden idol of Azathoth's All-Seeing Eye.

“The White Gorilla,” I replied.

Jackie snorted as if I’d said something deeply funny.

“Man, he hates that name.”

“A sorcerer of some repute from the Pre-Rising time,” Blackman said. “Known even among us cats. Whether his world was destroyed by the Great Old Ones as well or he came from your world but fled to the Dreamlands before its destruction, he managed to gain much cultural cachet among the Arkhamite refugees as a purer example of humanity than the mutants most of mankind had become.”

Given Franz’s simian countenance, he was either being literally accurate given humanity’s evolutionary origins or grossly lying to a gullible audience. Mind you, the information I’d gleaned from the Black Cathedral told me humanity itself had never been pure. Apes and ape-men had been experimented on by the Elder Things to enhance our intelligence, contact with the Great Old Ones’ dreams had mutated others, and natural evolution as well as mutation had done the rest. There was no such thing as a pure human being, and I wasn’t even sure if such a thing would be desirable after seeing how overwhelmed we were by the least of the universe’s terrors.

“And he killed the zoogs for you,” I replied.

“Yes,” Blackman said, sounding rather disgusted. “It was the arrogance of my race that we could leave the job to our human servants and not have it screwed it up, but they slaughtered most of the zoogs on Pyre Night.”

“Pyre Night?” I asked.

“What they celebrate here instead of Halloween,” Jackie said. “Which I suppose is every day here.”

“We didn’t celebrate it in New Arkham,” I said. “I can’t imagine why.”

“We killed them all,” Blackman said. “The ones pretending to be human, the ones living their old selves, and everything in-between. Only a single one survived by the end of the week.”

“And now it wants revenge,” I said.

“Ha!” Blackman said.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“So human,” Blackman said. “Zoogs do not feel an urge to revenge any more than they feel a hatred for the kits they have killed, eggs they have eaten, or ghoul babes they devour. The last of their kind has different motivations.”

“Which are?” I asked, wondering how much of this information was simply blind prejudice versus the factual description of an alien creature’s ecology.

“I have not the slightest idea,” Blackman said. “Humans and cats can barely understand one another while being from the same basic material universe. Zoogs come from a far different world. However, it has involved stealing twenty kits and devouring their parents. I suspect most of them are still alive and I would like to keep it that way.”

“And you turned to Booth and Associates,” I replied.

“Franz Jermyn was no longer receptive to our entreaties once he found the zoogs’ treasure troves had been exaggerated,” Blackman said. “Your predecessor and Jessica were, by contrast, possessed of an exploitable sense of self-important heroism.”

“Tell me, is it common to insult the people doing your kind a favor in catdom?” I asked, annoyed.

I had no issue with the cat’s casually arrogant, even megalomaniacal, attitude. I’d dealt with many people over the years who were self-important fools. Most of them wore uniforms and were officers above Captain. However, it wasn’t my pride that was prickled by the four-legged fiend, but the casual insult he was throwing toward Jessica and Jackie. They were the ones risking their lives for the young of this particular group of sentients. They deserved respect and I wasn’t about to let any lip toward them slide.

“You’re being extremely well-compensated for your efforts,” Blackman said. “Or, at least, Jessica is. Also, bluntly, I can’t act differently. If I could, I would to better manipulate you.”

“Don’t take it personally, Booth,” Jackie said. “Literally everyone in this city is an asshole.”

“So I’ve noticed,” I muttered.

“Not you,” Blackman said, leaping up back into her arms. “I promise you will be spared when the revolution comes.”

“Aww,” Jackie said, rubbing the cat. “That would be so much funnier if not for the fact you just admitted to genocide.”

“Is there any sign of Jessica?” I asked. We’d been traveling for close to an hour and a half through the underground. Ignoring how much the environment was getting to me, I was wondering just how far she might have been able to get ahead of us on foot.

“Yes,” Blackman said, his voice troubled. It was the first sign of emotion from the cat that wasn’t tinged with monstrous arrogance. “There’s also the zoog.”

“What about the kits?” Jackie asked, showing she had not had her sense of empathy destroyed by her experiences in the Wasteland. It made her more human than human if you considered that feeling to be unique to our species (and yes, I recognized the irony that neither of us strictly qualified).

“No,” Blackman said. “I do not sense them.”

I reached into my coat, well Detective Booth’s coat, and drew out Mercury’s Gift. The weapon weighed heavily in my hands and a power radiated out from it that seemed to be resonating with the unnaturalness of the air. I checked the chamber and made sure that six bullets, each marked with a rune, were inside. I had two extras in my pocket once the existing bullets were expended.

Not many.

“Which way?” I asked, looking down a trio of black circular tunnels that included one leading to a purely natural cavern formation.

That was when I heard a series of gunshots from the natural cavern formation and I ran into it, ignoring my companions as I descended into the darkness. It was, in hindsight, a profoundly stupid thing to do, but that would include a preternatural number of my decisions anyway.

The Hand of Glory hovered behind me but began to flicker within the darkness of the craggy interior of the cave that was covered in a disgusting slime that oozed and pulsated along the walls. The smell became something wholly different and repellant, assaulting the senses but unable to be put into words except for its nauseating effect.

I struggled to keep up my pace but found myself slowed down as my feet sloshed into a disgusting black ooze that reached up to my ankles. Turning around a corner, I saw three armed men dead in the slime with their chests and faces opened by gunfire. They wore body armor and masks that were decorated by a flaming sword with an eye sigil I didn’t recognize.

Against the wall, shot in the stomach, was Jessica. She had a gun in her hand and was shaking with agony as she struggled to keep her insides in.

“No,” I said, approaching.

“Stay back!” Jessica said, pointing her weapon at me.

I stared at her. “Jessica, it’s me.”

“John is dead!” Jessica’s voice spoke, a mixture of terror and anger. “You’re a dream! You can’t trust anything here.”

I didn’t approach further, not interested in having tracked her down here only to be shot in the face.

“We need to get you to a doctor. We can do some field medicine down here.”

“Prove who you are!” Jessica shouted. “The knights won’t fool me again.”

I turned around to call to Jackie but found the cavern tunnels behind me were gone. The natural caverns we were in were, apparently, nothing of the sort. Indeed, turning my head, I saw the caverns past Jessica had also changed. We were in a location that was not limited by actual physics or geometry.

“Fuck,” I cursed, wondering if there was any possible way out of this situation. “We need to cooperate here. I am John and you’re going to trust me.”

Jessica kept the gun trained on me despite the fact she was dying. “No.”

That was when, at the other end of the shifting cave, I saw a figure come into view. It was longer rather than taller, hunched over and crooked in form, with a body covered in disgusting, filthy, patched, white fur. Its body was somehow both rat-like and snake-like with large hindlegs that supported a long slithering tail.

Its face, though—God its face—was an unholy amalgamation of bat and rat with enough human-like qualities to be expression-filled. Giant, drooping ears came across from its sided while, its eyes were pearl-like, iridescent orbs that lacked any irises but seemed full of milky-white fluid. Its mouth, if mouth it was, dripped with floppy expressive tentacles that each had an underbelly of teeth.

I knew in a moment that the creature was a zoog, the Napper, and its spindly, spider-like fingers reached out in the dimly lit cavern toward me. The words coming from its mouth were remarkably human and enunciated perfectly, which made it even more uncomfortable to realize it was speaking with the sound of multiple men.

“*Ny’gar al’ta al’bah Hastur Ya’gnac Ulgar Tsa’gorrah Mul,*” the Napper spoke as I felt the reality around me become an oppressive weight that froze me in place. The Napper was the god of this pocket dimension, its Dream Lord, and we were nothing more than the food for its larder.

That was when the Hand of Glory spell ended, and we were plunged into total darkness.

Chapter Eleven

The Napper ran up against me and grabbed me, something I could only experience with every sense except for sight. The smell of its breath was rotted meat and a horrible stench of sulphureous water that would have killed an ordinary man. I imagined, in a moment, that its mouth was open with rows of sharpened teeth to rip my throat clean from my body.

The shotgun was useless against the monstrous beast-man because the Napper was right up next to me. Nevertheless, I pushed it up into its mouth before it decapitated me, wedging it between its jaw like a staff. The Napper ripped it from my hands and tossed it to one side. That was when its eight-fingered hands wrapped around my throat and face at once.

The creature hadn't yet torn into me when a flare was broken and filled the room with glowing red sparks. Jessica had ignited the object, taken from the side of one of the dead soldiers on the ground before she shoved it against the side of the zoog despite her injuries. The cat-eating creature yowled and screamed as the flames singed its all-too-mortal flesh.

Taking advantage of the distraction, I pulled out Mercury's Gift and fired it into the chest of the zoog, then firing a second round into its overlarge dinosaur-like calves. The creature's wails were ear-splitting as it swung around its tail and caught me in the chest, sending me backward against the wall behind me. It was like being hit by a car, but I wasn't some meek scholar or inbred aristocrat fearing strange smells. I was a warrior hardened by the Wasteland and stayed consciousness. Anger and fury powered my actions as I met the zoog's terrible gaze. The flare was still burning, seeming some long-lasting brand of it.

Its eyes stared at me with blazing malevolence, and I unloaded two more rounds into its chest. The creature coughed up some hideous, blackish substance on the ground, clutching its injuries before starting to run away. My next two rounds missed it, striking the stone around the caverns as I could see reality start to shift around us. The tunnel it exited down vanished in a shimmer and the one behind us returned.

I *hated* extra-dimensional angles.

A part of me was tempted to go after the giant rat-man but even if I wanted to, I couldn't. I also had a much larger part of me that wanted to go to Jessica's side. Rescuing intelligent cats—even if I believed them to be

real children—didn't matter to me as much as the safety of the woman I'd seen come back from the dead. Call it selfish, callous, speciesist, or even evil, but it was how I felt. I'd hardened my heart against any but a small tribe of people that I loved and cared for, even if I would have given my own life for a stranger's child.

"Jessica!" I said, rushing to her side and moving to check her wound. "I'm sorry! I should have been here faster!"

"Go…" Jessica muttered, clearly in a bad way. "After that son of a bitch. Don't let him get away with…the kids."

It showed the difference between us in that moment. Jessica had overcome all of her past prejudices against nonhumans and was more worried about their safety than her own life. It was, honestly, almost too good to be true and reminded me that the real Jessica—if such a thing existed—had tried to kill me as a mercy.

Still, I was ready to go as a dying request from her. The sheer unfairness of it was something that threatened to rip away the last bits of remaining sanity I possessed. I felt, in that moment, a beating of something alien and evil within me. No, not evil. Primal. A creature that did not ascribe to any Earthly morality and looked forward to ripping the Napper apart as the only thing it had in common with the human John Henry Booth. With the burning flare on the ground, bobbing up and down in the water but not extinguished, I swore the shadow on the wall became the image of a Kastro'vaal warrior again.

"John!" Jackie's voice shook me out of my moment of oblivion. She was coming down the tunnel that had reappeared behind us, with Blackman in tow. The cat leapt from her arms and moved up to Jessica's side, staring at her.

"I'm sorry," I muttered to Jackie. "We missed one another. It was my mistake. Jessica needs medical attention and I'm going after that *thing*. I got four shots into it but I don't think that's enough to take it down."

Rather embarrassingly, I recalled that my revolver was out of ammunition and I took a moment to put my remaining two bullets into it. The magic woven into them was hopefully giving the Napper the pain of a lifetime. I had no idea just how strong it was, only that they should have been able to put down an elephant from space.

"You should have gotten in six," Blackman said.

“Shut up!” I snapped, angry at his behavior in the face of Jessica’s. “I promise I’ll get whoever—”

That was when Jessica stood up, wiping away the blood off her stomach to reveal a completely uninjured smooth surface.

“What the fuck,” I said, in less than polite tones.

“I seem to be alright,” Jessica said, looking as confused as everyone else in the group.

“Interesting,” Blackman said, looking her up and down. “Now let’s get back to killing the zoog.”

“Did you do this?” I asked, looking down.

“No, John,” Blackman said, licking its right paw. “You did.”

“What?” I asked, almost simultaneously with Jessica.

“She is your familiar,” Blackman said. “Born from a wish.”

“Explain,” I said.

Blackman looked up. “No.”

Well, that was direct. “Why?”

“It amuses me,” Blackman said. “Perhaps when the zoog is killed, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

“There’s a reason I like dogs,” I said, looking at Jackie. “I’m going to need your help tracking this thing down.”

“Is that a ghoul joke?” Jackie asked, referring to my dog comment.

“No,” I paused. “Maybe. Not intentionally.”

“We need to get some things straight, first,” Jackie said, keeping her hand on her shotgun. I wasn’t sure if she was safer holding it or the cat she frequently hauled around in its place.

“Like why I’m still alive?” Jessica asked, shaking her head.

“That too,” Jackie said. “But first I’d like to know who the hell those bodies are?”

I looked over at the dead men in the water beside us. “You know, I’d almost forgotten them.”

“You’ve seen that many bodies, Dad?” Jackie asked.

“You’ve been living here in the City awhile,” I said, wondering if it really was the sort of place where you stopped thinking of death and violence as a constant companion. Then again, maybe it was me since I’d killed two men since this morning and was working on a third—if you thought the Napper was a man.

“They’re Knights of Arkham,” Jessica said, looking down at the bodies. “Specifically, they’re Hunters. They could be cops underneath that uniform or citizens playing soldier. It doesn’t matter because they came here to kill me.”

“Because you were trying to save cats?” I asked.

“Because I was married to you,” Jessica said, dryly. “You were a real popular guy in the City.”

“I’m getting that impression,” I said, looking down at the corpses. “Just what did I do to piss so many people off?”

I didn’t want to believe it was just the obvious answer that I was an alien, and she was a human woman. There were many places in the Wasteland where that would have gotten me assaulted or killed all by itself. Indeed, human tribalism would have made it an impossible union for other, even more stupid, reasons.

“What you would have done in the same position,” Jackie said, pausing. “Okay, I’m going to need a second because this is still pretty damn weird for me. I’m glad you’re alive but are you alive? Are you the same John or like his doppelganger from Planet Ten?”

“You read too many pulps, Jackie,” Jessica said.

“My John got me started on them,” Jackie muttered. “Okay, that sounded wrong.”

I shook my head. “Let’s ditch the existentialism talk and focus on getting the Napper.”

“Going into a zoog’s lair alone is insane,” Jackie chastised Jessica. “This one can control the angles.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked.

Jackie stared at me. “You, of all people, should know that.”

I had no idea what she was talking about.

“I’m not alone,” Jessica said. “I have you guys now and we still have find those kids.”

“That’s assuming they’re still alive,” Blackman said. “I don’t smell them. This might well be a mission of revenge. Which is fine, it’s what we cats love more than anything else. Well, except sleep. One of our advantages here in the Dreaming City.”

Jessica looked away.

Blackman walked up to the wall the Napper had fled through and stared at it. Just as before, it shimmered and our surroundings once more changed

to become different, providing a passageway down further into the zoog's lair.

"There," Blackman said.

"Should I even bother asking?" I asked, looking down at the cat.

"No," Blackman replied.

I sighed. "Well, we should go then."

I didn't want to admit because it was a foreign feeling to me but, I was scared. I had mastered my fear long ago, having accepted death as the inevitable consequence of my choice to become a New Arkham Ranger. Long after I had abandoned that profession, I'd steeled myself against unnamable horrors and unspeakable things that I was willing to throw myself into the jaws of, but now I had a lingering feeling inside the pit of my gut that I loathed. One that I had not been willing to entertain before, which was the antithesis of effectiveness in the face of the supernatural: hope.

I mentally cursed myself for this indulgence and wondered if my children had been cruelly abused by the fact that I'd never accepted the possibility of a future before this day. I hated that I was entertaining such an idea now. The City was an illusion, the proverbial utopia that existed nowhere for the simple fact that it continued to exist in the face of my dead world's fate. Yet, exist it did and if it didn't magically vanish like a soap bubble popping, I wondered if a life might be possible here.

I expected at any moment for Nyarlathotep to appear and slay Jackie, Jessica, or the entire Dreaming City just for the sheer cruel indulgence of depriving me of them. It would be akin to taking the wings off a fly or burning ants with a shard of glass but well within the immortal's character as I'd observed it. Yet, I could not suppress the wonder that I had people to lose now and potentially time with them.

What a cruel joke it was that I had spent my first day murdering two police officers over my own grave before crawling into a monster-filled pit where only freak occurrence or alien miracle had saved Jessica's life. It seemed the age-old proverb that one could not teach an old dog new tricks held true and the previous Booth, my unfortunate doppelganger, had paid the ultimate price. Was I doomed to come to a place of civilization and life, only to die in violence or burn it down to the ground? I felt an overwhelming kinship to the long dead mythical Conan and how his own clean barbaric ways had clashed with the corruption of urban life.

“I’m with you,” Jessica said, frowning. “We’ll see this monster dead or die trying.”

“Better still the former than the latter,” Blackman said. “Preparing for defeat is something I have never understood. Perhaps that is why so very few human dreamers are as effective as cats.”

“And yet you’re living in Randolph Carter’s city rather than one dreamed up by cats,” Jackie pointed out. Perhaps she was the only one who was willing to argue with the cat about its arrogance. I personally felt it was a bit like arguing with a fish about swimming or a human about fucking. There was no point and even if you succeeded, they’d fall back into it.

“If it’s his city, where is he?” Blackman asked. “Humans are the ones who expect their gods to be absent. Cats embody theirs.”

Jackie didn’t have an answer for that. Instead, she said, “Come on, John, let’s go kill this thing. Otherwise, we’ll be retreating rather than advancing.”

How I envied her overconfidence. I’d briefly considered going, once more, alone into the zoog’s lair, but such sentiment was as tactically unsound as it was pointless. Not only would neither Jessica—as strange as her behavior was to me from the woman I remembered—nor Jackie agree to it, but if I ended up going alone then I would almost certainly be killed. Then our group would be more vulnerable, and they would be more likely to die than be saved. Nobility was fine for those Wastelanders who could afford it, but it was rarely practical. Those who died for it were also forgotten by the survivors.

“Agreed,” I said, turning back to the tunnel leading deeper into the Stygian darkness.

The cat smelled the air as it moved ahead of me. “It is wounded. Crippled but still alive.”

“That gives us one advantage,” Jessica said, picking up a belt from one of the dead Knights of Arkham and wrapping it around her waist. She then reached down and picked up the still bobbing flare on the ground before hoisting it in the air.

“You don’t have a flashlight?” Jackie asked.

“I had a lantern,” Jessica said, sighing. “Unfortunately, it made me a massive target.”

“John had a glowing hand he was using as a torch,” Jessica said. “Can you do that again?”

“No,” I replied.

“Why?” Jackie asked.

“Because it’s magic,” I replied, not exactly happy we were standing there, waiting for some sign to move on.

Probably from me.

Deciding to check the Knights of Arkham’s bodies, I hoped there would be some sign of magic or a weapon capable of cutting into the zoog. There was no such thing as the truly supernatural in certain respects—the true gods like Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep were aliens that simply wielded near omnipotent power to re-arrange reality.

Most other magic was either Dreaming or science so advanced that they could use simply call upon it anytime and anywhere via the “codes” built into the fabric of the universe by infinitely more advanced species. But if it walked like a duck and quacked like a duck, then wasn’t it a duck? Or was that simply an easy excuse to dismiss the occult? Either as ill-understood truths of reality or the truly unfathomable to our elevated ape-like minds?

“Not to make a stupid question, John, but what can you do?” Jessica asked.

“Excuse me?” I asked, finding a knife blessed by Kithnid, the supposed antithesis of Cthulhu. It was moonsilver plated and vibrated with the power of something, but the rest of their weapons were distressingly mundane and certainly hadn’t done them any good against Jessica. That was another sign she was perhaps something other than human.

And I didn’t care.

“Magic,” Jessica said. “Not to put too fine a point, but the John I remember from the Wasteland was more than human.”

That contradicted her earlier statement about waking up in this world.

“In the Wasteland, I wasn’t entirely human.”

“Or at all,” Jackie said, “but being human is overrated.”

I glared at her, not happy at her description.

“But I don’t have access to that part of me anymore. Thank whatever gods truly rule the world. I know a few spells still, though. Things I learned from Mercury or Doctor Ward.”

Or had dreamed of.

“Like what?” Jackie asked. “Sorry, Dad, I just want to know what our options are.”

Dad, was it? How easy it was for them to slip into the idea I was their replacement John. That they'd broken a glass vase and gone to the market to get a replacement. Yet was what I was doing any different? They were sliding into me in the role that I had eagerly embraced. I was wearing the dead man's clothes for hell's sake.

There was also a creeping dread in my stomach that this wasn't their doing or mine either. That I'd been shoved into this role by terrifying forces beyond any of our comprehension as a replacement part in an engine. Detective Booth had died and the show had to go on so I'd been tapped to be his understudy. Okay, I may have lost myself in metaphors there. But how did one grasp with the concept that you were utterly replaceable, and you weren't sure you truly cared since the alternative was life as the last human-thinking being in a dead world?

"I know fifteen or twenty glyphs," I replied, answering them. "Mostly, I can sketch them in bullets and on blades."

"What does that do?" Jessica asked.

"Mostly, it helps me kill things that can't normally be killed," I replied. "I also know the Hand of Glory spell, a blood transfer spell, and how to make a true Elder Sign. That'll bar most things strange from entering its presence but not everything. I can't tell you the reason, but it didn't work on me when I was a monster, so it's got that going for it. Also, I can summon…"

I trailed off, realizing that revelation wouldn't help matters.

"Summon who?" Jackie asked.

"The Crawling Chaos," I said.

They stared at me. Even Blackman—who'd been keeping his gaze focused on the tunnel he'd summoned.

"You asked," I replied.

Chapter Twelve

"You can summon *Nyarlathotep*, a genuine god, and you didn't think to mention that?" Jackie asked. "What's next, you're pals with Jesus?"

Jessica looked discomforted.

"It's not like that. The summoning spell to bring forth Nyarlathotep was something I memorized from the *Necronomicon*'s English translation."

"Spoken with the same energy as 'I went to the market', not 'I memorized a spell to summon the God of Evil from the Book of Ultimate Darkness'," Jackie said.

"Neither of which is an accurate description," I said, not stopping myself before I defended my tormentor. "Nyarlathotep isn't evil so much as uncaring about all moral constraints."

"You know there's a word for that," Jessica said.

"Cat?" Jackie suggested.

"Evil," Jessica said. "Also, cat."

"We don't have time for any of this," I said, turning around and heading down the tunnel. I preferred to face the Napper again rather than deal with these sorts of questions. Jessica jogged up to move by my side, carrying the light that seemed a pitiful defense against the darkness.

The spell to summon Nyarlathotep I'd used only once in the Dreamlands and the consequences of it had been dire. It had brought me to the attention of the Crawling Chaos and established a permanent link between us. One that possibly transcended time as Doctor Alan Ward had put the Other God's mark on me beforehand. But, had he really done that, or had Nyarlathotep begun interfering in my life retroactively because of what I'd done later? Had my entire existence come to pass because of a being that defied cause and effect? It didn't help the Messenger of the Other Gods was a compulsive liar.

No matter, the spell was useless now. I couldn't get Nyarlathotep to *not* appear to me. Even then, the spell was a trap that had been dictated to Abdul al-Hazred and whoever he had learned it from. It sent out a call to the Black Pharoah but gave no true compulsion to appear, let alone obey. No force in the cosmos could compel Nyarlathotep to obey a mere mortal, though he might pretend if it amused him. These were the things I'd read in

Alan Ward's annotations throughout the *Necronomicon*'s translation. Before the book had succumbed to weather damage and silverfish in the world's last days.

It occurred to me that Detective Booth had never shared this information with the others and that gave me some sense of satisfaction. Perhaps he had never known that spell, or maybe he'd simply been smart enough to not be too honest with those he loved most. Then he'd gotten himself killed by his own ex-wife—my ex-wife. I only knew a few things about parallel realities, it wasn't exactly useful knowledge in the Esoteric East, but I assumed it was the basis for all this strangeness. Any other way led to madness.

That was when a cold and echoing voice spoke through the tunnels. It seemed to come from everywhere at once but was soft and almost soothing, spoken by two sets of vocal cords that were identical like dual recordings played at once.

"You are coming.
Yes, you are.
See me where I star.
Burning bright,
like the night.
Everything a fright."

"The Napper is close if we can hear him make shit poetry," I muttered, sloshing my feet through an oily black substance I hoped didn't suddenly catch fire or turn into a monster trying to swallow me. The light provided barely pierced the abyssal void about us and I was glad that Jackie and Blackman stayed behind us, the latter bundled up in Jackie's arms as she'd put away her weapon. Correctly, I guessed, she'd decided the cat was more useful than a shotgun.

"I don't think the Napper is mentally well," Jessica said.

"You don't fucking say," I murmured. "How do you even measure the sanity of a monster?"

"I've learned the hard way that monster and man are two sides of the same coin," Jessica murmured. "If it's really something that doesn't even approach a mortal mind then it can't be considered a monster. It's just a natural disaster or an animal. Hating either is an exercise in futility."

I understood why she was talking in such a detached abstract way. It was giving away our position, but the Napper had already demonstrated it knew where we were, that it had some sort of limited control over where we were going or what he perceived. Something I hoped either Blackman could counteract, or it was too wounded to do. No, talking about it, if it felt the need to taunt us, was a way to draw it out. I approved of her psychological tactics even if I didn't necessarily buy what she was selling. Plenty of humans were alien to me. That didn't mean I hated them any less when they went after me.

"Like the Color," I muttered, regretting the words out of my mouth the moment they left them.

The mention of the abominable thing from space that slaughtered her family didn't have the expected effect on her. Instead, she just sort of nodded and stared forward. Then again, this Jessica had never lost her husband or children to the Color. Instead, she'd amicably parted ways with them after waking up alive. It was a confusing and disturbing sensation, struggling to see someone who was identical to the person I'd cared for most—except for a handful of others—in so many ways yet also be fundamentally different in others. The dissonance caused me distress when I needed all of my wits about me.

"We're almost there," Blackman said. "You should be prepared for the fight of your life."

"I've killed a shoggoth," I said, dryly.

"Yes, and you were something akin to one then even if you didn't know it," Blackman said. "Now you are a dream of Booth's humanity."

I wasn't sure if he was being literal or not. Hell, I wasn't sure if any of that mattered in the Dreamlands. "Sure."

The tunnels eventually gave way to a large chamber that was as far from what I expected to find underground as anything else I'd encountered so far in the City. It was a temple, hard carved, and looked like it had been the product of a thousand workers, or perhaps just one particularly gifted dreamer.

The chamber was a massive oval one, like being in the interior of the top half of an egg on its side. The walls were encircled by pillars that were decorated in abstract, bizarre, and frankly unsettling art that I hadn't seen outside my worst nightmare. It was almost pornographic in the depictions of the zoog, ancient humanity, and something else.

The interior of the chamber was empty of furnishings except for a large sacrificial pit that was burning with great green balefire that rose a dozen feet in the air. It produced no smoke but an earthy aroma that smelled of burnt meat and incense. The light produced reached only the edge of the chamber and swirled in strange directions as if it was obeying no known laws of physics. It was a living thing and reminded me, in some terrible way, of the Color.

And just like that, I was once more in another part of my past.

"A Color, Doctor?" I asked, wearing a lab coat and a pair of safety goggles as I stood in the laboratory of Doctor Alan Ward.

"It is as good a name for it as any. It is more properly an energy-based being intruding in our reality," Doctor Ward said, being a white-haired, dignified, Anglo-European man wearing an apron over a tattered but still dignified suit. He, too, wore a pair of safety goggles as he used a glass stirring rod to mix a noxious, glowing, green solution in a beaker.

The best scientific facilities in New Arkham were no better than a high school science lab of the Pre-Rising World but Doctor Ward made use of them anyway. His private library, homemade equipment, and personal experiments had been given their own building with dozens of rooms.

It had been the best investment the Council of Leaders had ever made as they had achieved breakthroughs and rediscoveries of old technologies that had turned us from just another settlement into a rising power in the New England Wasteland.

"How can you kill a Color?" I asked, confused.

"Killing it would imply the creature is alive," Doctor Ward replied. "When dealing with things outside the laws of our physical reality, we must abandon traditional ideas of cause and effect. It may not exist as a living entity but is its own traveling universe, having its own rules and existence. You might as well ask how to defeat a storm cloud or how to kill an earthquake."

"A storm cloud or an earthquake didn't kill Jessica's family," I said as I narrowed my eyes. "They're also not wandering around destroying settlement after settlement. The Color acts like a living thing, preying on the living, and we don't know if it's going to stop before it destroys all of humanity."

"Fair point," Doctor Ward said, turning around. "There's a reason I consider you to be my best student, John. Your mind is open to possibilities

and ways of thinking other men in New Arkham aren't. I'm going to be honest, I think you're wasted in the Rangers. You could be working with me in coming up with long-term solutions to humanity's survival."

I frowned.

"As much as I am honored by the offer, Doctor, I note the short-term survival of humanity is no less important."

Doctor Ward's expression was unreadable.

"Very well. In any case, when one is dealing with the preternatural, one must turn to preternatural means in order to deal with it."

"You mean we can use magic to banish it?" I asked.

That was surprisingly comforting. Like all Arkhamites, I had a healthy skepticism of magic. Sorcery was something associated with the Great Old Ones and part of what had put humanity on the bottom of the totem pole rather than the top. However, Doctor Ward had demonstrated it could be harnessed by humans for human causes. Since I didn't see any other way of defeating a creature immune to bullets or explosives, I was open to suggestions.

"Not quite," Doctor Ward said, making a kind of amused smile that was not wholly comforting. "More a mixture of science and sorcery. The technology of the Pre-Rising humanity had its weaknesses but with the help of Beta Squad, I recovered an old relic and with various incantations, have managed to alter the interior contents while also bypassing the safeties. I have reanimated its dead but sleeping power and believe it can be used to rid ourselves of our extradimensional pest."

Doctor Ward had never been lacking in showmanship and this was all for my benefit, even though I was an audience of one. Someday it would get him into trouble. The Council of Leaders did not tolerate rivals and a man who could perform miracles, whatever their origin, most certainly was that.

Unfortunately, his efforts to impress me were wasted. All I could think about was Jessica and her near-catatonic state of withdrawal.

"Forgive me, Doctor, but could you cut to the chase?"

Doctor Ward nodded and drank down his peculiar potion as if it were a soft drink before leading me into a nearby storage room. There, nestled among the mops and brooms was the heart of a weapon that had once been considered the possible source of humanity's now certain extinction: a nuclear warhead.

A moment later, I was halfway through the temple and Mercury's Gift was pressed against the forehead of the Napper on the ground. My body had carried out a hunt of its own accord while the rest of my mind had been occupied in a memory.

My body had somehow known that the Napper was inside the temple and hiding itself somehow. I didn't know if it was a natural camouflage or some kind of invisibility, but it was now lying on the ground, wounded and bleeding its blackish red ichor on the stone around us. The eyes didn't contain defiance or resignation, at least as humans defined them. Instead, it merely looked up at me with an inscrutable alien expression.

"The cats, where are they?" I asked, knowing the Napper was dying already.

Unfortunately, so did it.

"You will never find them."

I prepared to execute the kidnapper but paused long enough to ask a question that could not have a satisfactory answer.

"Why? Was it revenge? Some natural instinct? Religion?"

The Napper bared its monstrous teeth, twisting them into a smile.

"It was for the art of it."

I pulled the trigger on Mercury's Gift, causing the Napper's brains—if that was what the organ was in his skull—to blast out the back of its head. The creature fell backward before immediately starting to rot.

It was a disgusting sight and I pulled away from the child napper and watched it split open before a rank greenish mist began to pour from its body. Hideous arm-sized larvae with human-like faces started to crawl out of its body, letting forth nightmarish wails. I hesitated to strike at the creatures, unsure who or what they were.

Blackman, however, did not hesitate and stepped forward to breath out his fiery breath onto the Napper's remains. The larvae's screams became death rattles as they thrashed and burned in the flame before collapsing into the Napper's remains.

"You should throw the remains into the balefire," Blackman said, stretching and looking relaxed. "That will keep the creatures from reincorporating."

"What the fuck were those things?" Jessica asked, tossing her flare onto the ground, and pulling out her pistol to shoot at the remains, seemingly for good measure.

“Zag’rath,” Blackman said, as if it meant anything. “Chronovores. They attach themselves to the timelines of individuals and eat their lives. Eventually, the only way to survive is to feed them the lives of the young. The zoog must have drunk some bad water from the Jungles of X’tal, or perhaps Carcosa. They’ve probably been growing in him for years, increasing his intelligence and lowering his sanity. He never would have been able to dream up this temple otherwise. I believe it is to the zoog god, the Great Old One Y’golonac.”

I stared at Blackman. “This is all over a *stomach parasite*?”

Blackman gave a catlike stare then looked away.

“Not a bad metaphor. But, it seems unlikely we will find the kits. I consider your contract fulfilled. Payment will be made available to you, Jessica, and Jackie from our human pets. I’ll even include a bonus. You may not have been able to rescue them but you did avenge them.”

“No!” Jessica shouted, suddenly. “I refuse to accept that.”

“Acceptance is hardly necessary,” Blackman said. “Even here, facts exist independently of desires.”

Jessica turned to Jackie.

“Sniff ‘em out.”

Jackie blinked.

“What?”

“The Napper was invisible,” Jessica said, as if desperate to find some logic behind her actions. “He has to have hidden the kits here somewhere in his temple. Sniff ‘em out.”

“I’m not actually a dog, you realize,” Jackie said, taking a snarkier tone than I’d seen her display so far. It reminded me of the many, many fights I’d seen her get involved with Mercury over things both great and small back in the Wasteland. It was easy to think of her as a teenager, but she was a woman in her thirties here despite not looking it. Possibly. I had no idea how much time passed, and ghouls were immortal. Ugh. I couldn’t think of that now.

“Please,” Jessica asked, her voice desperate. She didn’t want to deal with the reality that all the children were dead. It was a dark and disgusting truth that had already greeted us once. Gamma Squadron had been all but annihilated trying to rescue children from the Black Cathedral. By the time we’d found them, they’d already been slaughtered and their

consciousnesses sent onto the Dreamland. This? This was worse but no less inevitable.

“Fine,” Jackie sighed. “I’ll give it a try but don’t expect me to fetch anything.”

I took this time to start kicking the Napper’s remains and the burned parasites into the balefire, careful not to touch them with bare flesh. They sizzled, burned, and vanished into the strange, magical flames. I wasn’t about to take any chances with these things even if I didn’t believe Blackman was necessarily on the right on this—not that there necessarily was a right side. Blood feuds rarely had a good guy, though genocides always had a villain.

“This should be interesting,” Blackman said, staring at the burning remains of the Napper and its parasites. “I wonder if my canine friend can find something that I haven’t.”

Jackie proceeded to start sniffing around the chamber and I didn’t expect much to occur. Much to my surprise, though, she reacted by stopping toward one end of the chamber. That was when she waved her hand and the light shuddered before collapsing an illusion I hadn’t detected. There, on a stone altar of a kind, was a sack full of mewling animals. The noise had also been covered up by the magic.

“Holy shit, they’re alive,” Jackie said, as stunned as I was.

The mews became coherent, childlike voices begging to be freed and Jessica moved to untie them from their prison. There were half a dozen young cats within the sack, all of them alive. It was a miracle. Which is why I didn’t believe it. Really, I didn’t believe it. Happy endings didn’t happen in my world.

Ever.

This felt contrived, like the hand of God had reached down to make everything okay and it was artificial. Manipulated. Looking out the corner of my eye, I saw the Dreaming King before turning my head to see nothing. This was someone’s story, and I had no control over where it was going. Someone was sitting at a typewriter somewhere, having their jollies at my expense. Life was but a stage and we were but players—and I suspected a tragedy was afoot.

Chapter Thirteen

Victory was its own aphrodisiac.

As much as I wanted to analyze how pat, trite, and strange our victory had turned out to be, I couldn't. I was too busy being glad it had happened and once we'd delivered the cats to a building apparently inhabited by the cult of Bast, Jessica and I chose to celebrate by heading back to her apartment. Jackie, being an adult woman, had her own way of enjoying itself and headed to visit an old boyfriend.

An irresistible force brought us together and I had to admit I didn't resist very hard. I wasn't her John, and she wasn't my Jessica, but the two of us gave into passions that carried us through the night into the wee hours of the morning.

Her bed was a simple one with white sheets, and there was a window overlooking Red Hook, and a radiator as well as fan for amenities. It was cold outside with frost on the windows and the noises of cars, trains, and even the occasional passing small plane above. The Dreaming City, if you pardoned the pun, never slept. My own rest was also dreamless and empty, a weird state that was undoubtedly related to the fact I was in the world of dreams.

It wasn't quite morning when I woke up naked in Jessica's bed with her beside me. The two of us with a thousand things to say but no idea how to broach any of them. I had longed to be with her once, something Mercury never held against me during our years together, but the only time it happened had been a disaster. I also could never forgive myself nor forget the tragic circumstances that had severed me from her.

This was not another chance. No, it was a delusion. An illusion. A trick. But I didn't care. I hated myself for not caring, but I wanted to give myself completely to the lie. My son was out there somewhere, both my daughters, and there was a chance to reconnect. But I had to guard myself because if the Crawling Chaos had arranged this, it was undoubtedly a dying man in the desert finding an oasis that would turn to ash on his lips the moment he was about to find sweet release.

"Can't sleep?" Jessica asked, looking over at me.

"I've slept," I said, checking a wind-up alarm clock beside the bed. It had radioactive paint on the numbers to provide a green glow. "A few

hours, at least. That was enough to sustain me in the Wasteland."

"Probably not healthy, though," Jessica said, sitting up and exposing her back. It had every last scar, mark, and sign of injury of the real Jessica. Someone who knew them well had put all of them all over her body—or maybe she was Jessica and the trauma of her resurrection had simply wiped out whatever she'd experienced before. Wouldn't that be another Christmas miracle?

"Health and survival are two different things, despite their relationship," I replied. "You never know what's going to attack while asleep."

"Sounds lonely," Jessica said.

"Only if you don't have someone to keep watch," I replied, pausing. "I haven't for several years."

"Why?" Jessica asked, surprising me.

"Everyone was dead," I said, thinking of the events that had led me to my seeking Mister Death's help.

Jessica took a deep breath and went to her nightstand to remove a pack of cigarettes and a plain metal lighter. "I don't think you should leave the City."

"Quite the change from your attempts to get me to flee," I said, having known this suggestion was coming for some time.

"You died, John," Jessica said, once more drawing a parallel between me and my doppelganger. "Believe me, I don't suggest this lightly."

I didn't think she was. On the other hand, it wasn't a practical choice either. "What would I even do?"

"There's an opening at the agency," Jessica said, pretending to be joking due to the poor taste of the comment. I also knew she was desperate for me to say yes.

"I'm not a detective," I muttered, sitting up and moving my feet off the side of the bed. "That's the big difference between me and Detective Booth."

Jessica looked at me. "That's less of an issue than you might think. He came from the Wasteland as well."

It was a constant reminder that it wasn't even a parallel John who'd grown up, lived, and died in the City. No, he'd come from an identical dead world as my own, or perhaps different time period. Maybe we'd split somehow, or I was a copy, or he was. The possibilities were endless when

you stopped believing in logic or sense. Occam's Razor didn't apply when you lived in an infinite multiverse of possibilities and mad gods.

"And he was probably terrible at it when he began," I replied, referring to Detective Booth's detective skills. "I don't have any supernatural talent at observation."

Jessica snorted. "Good."

"Good?" I asked.

"What? You think every detective is like Sherlock Holmes?" Jessica inquired.

"Oh, that man you're familiar with," I said.

Jessica nodded. "John couldn't shut up about all of his favorite detectives. Usually, that was because he thought it was pretty damn ridiculous to compare what they did to what he did."

"Yes, Sherlock Holmes never killed a zoog in the middle of an ever-shifting, extradimensional sewer," I replied, dryly.

"Probably not," Jessica said.

"Maybe the giant rat of Sumatra was a zoog," Blackman said. The cat was sitting on top of the apartment's radiator.

Jessica jumped and immediately rushed for a sheet to cover herself.

"What the hell? Have you been here the entire time?"

"Yes," Blackman said, blinking lazily.

"Get the hell out!" Jessica snapped.

"Why?" Blackman asked, looking up. "Do you think I get any particular thrill watching two monkeys copulate? Besides, Jackie is with her boyfriend. They'll be mating all night. Probably call over her other boyfriend."

I didn't need that mental image.

Jessica stared at him, unable to come up with a proper response. She finally settled on, "Please leave."

"Fine," Blackman jumped off the radiator and trotted off to the couch in the next room.

"That's never a good sign," Jessica said.

"What?" I asked.

"A cat doing what it was told," Jessica muttered. "It means something terrible is about to happen."

I shook my head. "What were we talking about?"

“I was trying to explain real life detectives don’t actually have to be that observant,” Jessica said, surprising me.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a requirement of the job,” I said, wondering where she was going with this. Was she so bent on trying to get me to fill her lover’s place that she wanted me to take over his job as well as identity? The answer seemed to be yes. Yet, I couldn’t help but feel I’d already crossed that line. Who was I to talk about matters of propriety for my dead brother when I’d already slept with his wife and murdered two men over his grave?

“John always told me that Sherlock Holmes would be an absolutely crap detective,” Jessica said, switching the subject to something a bit more humorous. I welcomed the distraction.

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “How’s that?”

“John believed the primary skill that any decent private detective should cultivate is social engineering.”

“Social engineering, huh,” I said, pulling her into my arms on the bed. I was glad to feel her against me. If we were living in a land of illusions, I couldn’t tell the difference from reality. Indeed, the Wasteland was starting to feel like a distant dream, and I could picture the Dreaming City and Detective Booth’s cases better than some of my missions with Gamma Squadron.

“People are the meat and drink of a private detective,” Jessica said, putting her hand on my chest. She was close enough to kiss. “Knowing what they want, what they’re willing to do to get it, and who can tell you this is the way to solve ninety percent of all cases.”

“*Su bono*,” I said, dryly. I leaned in to kiss her lips.

“Don’t know him,” Jessica said, turning her head away. It was a teasing gesture and most welcome.

“Latin for ‘who profits?’,” I replied, remembering my inconsistent classical education from Doctor Ward. “I suppose knowing who knows the value of an object, has access to it, and has the character of or circumstances to force him to be a thief is more valuable than what flavor of tobacco a man might smoke.”

“Exactly,” Jessica said, leaning her head on my chest. “I think you have that quality.”

“Also, the ability to shoot my way out of a problem when things go wrong,” I replied, believing that was also something that being a detective

required in the Dreaming City.

“Perhaps,” Jessica lowered her voice. “It didn’t work out for John in the end.”

There it was. The unfortunate reality that separated us despite how close we’d become in the past day. “Am I who you were sleeping with, tonight? Or was it your husband?”

Jessica pulled away from me. “I’ll answer that if you can tell me when you were touching me, you were touching the Jessica who died in the Wasteland.”

I had no answer for that.

Jessica stood up and wrapped the sheet around her like a makeshift toga. “Right, this was a mistake.”

I found myself speaking truths before I thought better of it. “My Jessica tried to kill me. I ended up being the one to kill her.”

The only noise within the room was the sounds of the City outside. Jessica was shocked into silence.

“Well, that’s a thing,” Jessica said, sitting down. “Why did she try to kill you?”

“Because I was becoming a monster,” I said, standing up and going into the apartment’s kitchenette and filling a glass with water. It’d be a long time since I could get water from a tap, and I couldn’t help but savor it. There was an acidic iron taste to it and hints of some chemical I didn’t recognize, but it was still something that quenched m thirst, even if it did nothing to dull the pain of this conversation.

Blackman was sitting in front of the television and flipping through black and white channels mixed in with color. The warped octagonal box with six antennae was not entirely human technology and changed at his stare rather than using any sort of remote. The shows included comedies, violent programs, pornography, strange color patterns, and blank channels that I somehow knew held shows not meant for human eyes.

Jessica walked into the room behind me. “Why did you kill her?”

I stared down at the empty sink, taking a deep breath as I struggled not to relive the memories that I’d forced down for the sake of what little remained of my sanity.

“Because I became a monster. I did everything in my power to suppress the creature inside me. The thing could only come out in spurts and when it did, it lashed out in ways that destroyed everything around me. I wanted to

kill myself after it. I wanted to kill myself before. Yet, I didn't. Because I wanted to live as a man more and every breath was precious. Even when those breaths came at the cost of those I loved. Perhaps that is the true definition of cowardice."

"You're not a coward, John," Jessica said, walking up to me. "The other me also sounds like a real bitch."

"We were raised to hate the supernatural," I replied. "It was a fate worse than death."

"A lot of supernaturals would disagree," Jessica said. "The living ones at least."

"There's a difference between those who can live as mortals and those that are wholly beyond them," I replied, putting down my glass of water. "I thought I could tell the difference. I was wrong."

"And your Jessica couldn't either," Jessica said.

I couldn't convey the grand irony of it all. The horror of the fact that Jessica had died on a quest to try to save the remainder of our world from the Unspeakable Horror. That she'd been, at that very moment, trying to save a town full of Deep One hybrids from a supremacist faction of their kind that wished to purge the human-blooded from their ranks. Cthulhu had not answered their prayers when he'd awoken and the zealots among their kind had sought someone to blame for this celestial oversight.

"She did, in the end," I replied. "You're very different, though."

"Am I?" Jessica asked.

I didn't want to say she was softer, though she was. That seemed like something the hardened private detective would take as an insult. "Yes."

Jessica looked down and it took me a moment to realize she was staring at her wedding band. "You know my John wasn't a great husband."

"Oh?" That surprised me.

"Yeah, I only started wearing this again after the funeral," Jessica said. "But no, we struggled a lot. There was infidelity. On both sides, but I'll be honest, mostly yours."

I grimaced. I had not been a good husband to Martha Booth, nor she a good spouse to me, but that had been because we'd been married by government fiat. I'd always thought it would have been better if I'd found the right person. That did not seem to have been the case. "He was a fool."

"I agree but he had his reasons," Jessica said. She went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of milk that immediately made me question where they

would get such a thing in the City. She poured herself a glass and began sipping it. “He didn’t believe I was real. Do you believe I’m fake?”

This wasn’t a situation I could lie in. No, sadly, I wasn’t nearly enough of a monster, and it was the first time I wished I was. “I believe you’re a dream. A dream come to life in the Land of Dreams. One that is no less real for it.”

Okay, I couldn’t lie but I sure as shit could put the nicest spin on it as possible.

“I don’t want to be just a dream,” Jessica said, finishing her drink. “I want to be real flesh and blood. Alive. Besides, it wasn’t just that.”

“Mercury,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” Jessica said. “You were always in love with her, even when you were claiming to be in love with me.”

“Mercury said the same thing to me,” I replied. “We spent twenty years together in New Ulthar and never quite got past your memory.”

“Probably lord over the locals as a sorcerer queen.”

“Actually, she owned the local whorehouse.”

Jessica stared.

“And I should have probably kept that part to myself,” I muttered.

Blackman snorted.

“Stop listening,” I snapped at the cat.

“No,” Blackman said. “Oh, there’s a news report of a bunch of people drowning via mass suicide. I hope they have footage.”

Jessica got up close to me and I could feel the heat of her breath against my skin.

“So, John, where does that leave us?”

“I have not the slightest idea.” I kissed her.

I still had to find this Dreaming King and figure out what the Tree’s cryptic messages had been all about. I had a slow, dreadful feeling crawling up the back of my neck, though. Somehow, this all seemed to be a set up. A way of making sure that I had something to lose to make sure there was pain when it was all ripped away. This City was something I wanted to live in, just for the sake of being able to experience life where I wasn’t a freak, but it felt also like it was teetering over the edge of oblivion.

And I hadn’t been able to save my own world.

I never even had a chance.

“You should answer the door,” Blackman said.

“Why?” I asked.
That was when there was a banging on it.
“We need to talk, John.”
It was Martha.
My wife.

Chapter Fourteen

Martha Booth and I had something of a complicated relationship, if I were to understate the point. An albino psychic created by Doctor Alan Ward—along with a bunch of other children he'd experimented upon in the womb—she and I had two children together. I could honestly state that I didn't know the first thing about her true feelings.

For all the fact I'd apparently possessed unnatural alien blood my entire life and never known it, Martha was an enigmatic woman who kept her true feelings to herself. The ability to know another person's true feelings made her a masterful manipulator and if she had any actual feelings toward me or our children, they'd remained hidden.

However, there had been some sort of affection toward me, or at least usefulness since she'd helped me escape New Arkham. I'd repaid the favor by making sure she survived when the shoggoths had risen and destroyed the ghoul city of Shak'ta'hadron. Now she was here, apparently responsible for my death, and Chief of Police.

"I'll get my gun," Jessica said, an intensity in her eyes. "It's time to avenge you."

"No," I replied, looking at her. "I want to speak with her."

Jessica stared up at me as if I was insane. Which, perhaps, I was by most human standards. "She killed you, John."

Well, that was a rare sentence.

"And killing her won't improve your position with the Knights of Arkham," I said, dryly. "We have to be cautious."

Returning with her had been a mistake, but neither of us had been thinking clearly. Okay, I'd been thinking with my dick but I couldn't exactly take it back now.

"I know you're in there, John," Martha's voice spoke through the other side of the door. "I can't read your mind, but I can read yours, Jessica."

"Fuck you!" Jessica snarled, hissing at the door.

"Yes, how very mature," Martha said. "I came alone."

Jessica went for a drawer in the kitchenette and pulled out a Browning automatic. I put my hand on her shoulder and turned around to walk to the door. It occurred to me that I was stark naked, and perhaps this was not the

best way to handle such things, but I wasn't exactly concerned with modesty at this point either.

Going to the door, I noted it was locked and had a chain as well as a bolt. The door was also reinforced with the steel hinges that were attached to one another. It would still be possible to break it down, but it would probably take a few more minutes to do so than normal. Certainly, no one was going to be kicking it open. It said a great deal about Jessica's state of mind as well as the sort of neighborhood this Red Hook replication was.

Opening the door, I saw Martha Peaslee Booth. She was practically unchanged from the last time we'd seen one another. Her hair was white as snow, her skin a similar color, and her eyes like a cat's. There was a flawlessness to her features that was not entirely natural, and she resembled a statue or a photo that had been doctored. Emotion rarely went to her face and only when she was deliberately putting on an act. It was not an entirely appealing thing, and I'd always been drawn to warmer people.

Martha was wearing a long thick black leather coat, black turtleneck, gray pants, and a red scarf around her neck. It was civilian attire and fashionable, or so I imagined, but vaguely put me in the mind of the loyalty officers that had overseen the suppression of all dissent within New Arkham. A telepath, Martha and the other psychics had been quite good at that. Of course, in the end, they'd only been loyal to themselves, but that was historically a thing that happened with those who were entrusted to destroy their own citizens. Who watched the watchers and all that.

Martha, however, stared at me as if she were seeing a ghost. It was a level of surprise and emotion I was not used to. "I would not have believed it if I had not seen it with my own two eyes."

"Good evening," I replied, stepping aside. "I understand you killed me."

"At least death has not affected your sense of humor," Martha said, stepping into the apartment. She looked at Jessica, who was holding her pistol, but not aiming it at Martha.

Yet.

"Be sure you don't miss," Martha said, daring her to shoot.

"I won't," Jessica said.

"Ahem," I replied, heading into the bedroom, and putting on a pair of undergarments to go with my pants. It was a strange sensation wearing another man's laundry, but at least it was clean. That was another thing I

had to get used to. The last time I'd been able to clean had been when it had rained on me.

Here, they bathed every day in hot water and cleaned their clothes every night.

Madness.

"I'll delay shooting the bitch until you're decent," Jessica said.

"John is never decent," Martha said. "Honorable? Courageous? Surprisingly erudite for a grunt in the Rangers? Yes. Decent? No. He's quite the cad."

I walked out into the kitchenette and shook my head.

"You did get me killed, at least as I understand it."

Martha's expression was empty of anything resembling emotion. I could never tell if that was a condition of her psychic powers or simply the fact that she did not feel about her family (myself included) the way I thought she should. It was unfair to her, perhaps, and I'd attempted to reach out to her several times over the decades. Each time I had been rebuffed and it was possible she simply never wanted to cross that bridge and be as close to me as I wanted to be with her.

"It was not intentional," Martha finally said.

"Not *intentional*?" Jessica asked, shocked. "How the hell can it be not intentional? You sent people to shoot him."

The circumstances of Detective John Henry Booth's death were something I hadn't exactly had a chance to investigate. It was also a distraction from my continued investigation of the Dreaming King and his connection to his place. Weirdly, Chandler's Law appeared in my head, "When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand."

It was a literary technique created by the author Raymond Chandler about keeping things exciting. The thing was, I could swear to you, *I didn't know that* until a few seconds prior. Pulp writing techniques weren't exactly something they taught in New Arkham's barely functioning school system.

Worse, I found myself once more in another moment in time.

The rain poured down through the cracks of the old, abandoned building, a crappy hotel that had been burned for the insurance money. It was the perfect place for the kidnappers to take little Annie Marsh, tie her up, and wait for her family to pay the ransom.

The scared fourteen-year-old little girl clinging to my leg wasn't Annie Marsh. She wasn't even a Deep One hybrid, but a regular human girl who

had been kidnapped instead. There would be no ransom and as soon as they realized they'd bagged the wrong girl, they'd slit Annie Marsh's throat and toss her in the bay like so many other bodies over the years.

Crooks were a naturally stupid lot, so I hadn't questioned the plan to track them down, go in, and take them out one by one to get the girl back for her parents. I'd gone in guns blazing after eliminating their lookout, and now all four of them were lying dead on the ground. One with his throat slit because I'd snuck up on him, and the other three gunned down with a modified Thompson machine gun while they'd played cards.

That's when the police had arrived to kill us both. I should have figured the Knights of Arkham would eventually come after me, but I'd stupidly believed my relationship with Martha would protect me. I'd assumed they were idiots when I should have been thinking about the White Gorilla, who manifestly was not.

They were the ones who'd set up the kidnapping, hired the four low-rent crooks to carry it out on someone who wouldn't be missed, and probably arranged the "parents" to hire me. A pair of humans who, in retrospect, looked nothing like the girl beside me. They were now going to send in the calvary, gun me down like an animal, and state what a tragedy it all was.

"Can we get out of this, Mister?" Annie asked me, looking up.

I could already hear the police moving up the stairs. They'd taken shots at me the moment I popped my head out through one of the holes in the wall to look at their squad cars. Attempts to identify myself had gone unanswered and then they'd started using a goddamn helicopter with a spotlight and sniper hanging on the side. Nope, this was all an attempt to murder me, and the City PD never left witnesses to their wrongdoing. It was time to do some cold equations.

There were two ways, possibly three, that I might be able to get out of this situation. The first was to do it movie-style—like one of my son's sorrier efforts—and simply kill every single son of a bitch standing between me and freedom. That would have been the most satisfying, a dozen dead cops aside, but was also flat out impossible without my powers.

If I'd had backup, maybe, but my partners had been kept from this mission by other cases of equal pressing importance—at least in terms of keeping the lights on. I also had, perhaps, subconsciously known this smelled from the start and went it alone out of some foolish, stubborn pride. Well, that had certainly worked out in my favor.

The second cold-blooded option was to acknowledge the kid prevented me from escaping so it was in my best interests to ditch her. Without her, I could possibly make it to the next building over or sneak past the police around me. It was a revolting thought, but had the highest chance of working. The problem was I couldn't convince myself that she'd be fine if I wasn't there to protect her escape.

The possible third? Well, it wasn't one I would have hesitated doing before coming to the City. I'd had nothing to live for and was always looking to die in a way that was meaningful. That had been before I'd found people I loved, a city to protect, and hope for the future. I wanted to live now and the only thing stopping me was the fact that to live, I'd have to become something that thought like a monster instead of a man.

Which was no choice at all.

"Yes," I belatedly answered her. "I'm going to make a distraction. I need you to go out the back and try to use the catwalk to get away."

"I can't," Annie whispered. "It's too high."

"Do it," I whispered, knowing I had seconds before the LAPD arrived in the room. "It's the only way to survive."

Something about my voice—I did have an impressive baritone—or that I was over six feet tall and made of mostly muscle was enough to convince her to run. I'd never know if she survived or not because I pulled out my gun and prepared to hold off the police if I could. Not even kill them, just delay them.

I managed to last about twenty minutes before I ran out of ammunition and they brought the helicopter around with a mounted machine gun that tore the entirety of the rooftop up, myself included.

"John?" Jessica's voice woke me up from the memories of a man that had died, and I had not experienced myself but had just lived as if they were my own.

His death.

My death.

Both our deaths.

Increasingly, I was starting to lose myself in this surreal city and I wasn't sure I entirely cared. If nothing else, I found myself relieved I hadn't died a coward. In the grand scheme of things, whether you die on your knees or on your feet didn't matter to the cosmic uncaring universe, but the answer to that was always whether it mattered to you. We were each god of our own

little respective universes and had absolute dominion only over how we reacted to events.

At least in theory.

“I was just reliving another man’s life,” I said, noticing only seconds had passed.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Jessica said.

“I signed off on the mission to kill you, yes,” Martha said.

Jessica looked ready to gun her down and I wasn’t inclined to stop her.

“But…” I trailed off, hoping she’d explain.

“I didn’t think you would die,” Martha said. “You have survived immensely more dangerous people than the police officers sent to kill you. I assumed you would either kill them all or would otherwise escape.”

“And the little girl?” I asked.

“If you believe one more dead child would excessively trouble my conscience then you do not know me as well as you think,” Martha replied, reminding me she was still someone with blood like ice water.

“You’re really not helping your case here,” Jessica said, keeping the gun fixed on her.

“I never quite understood why children were so valued by society,” Martha said, taking a seat by Blackman. “It seems that whenever they are threatened, people utterly lose their minds. Yet the only difference between them and adults is a matter of time.”

“And if it were your child?” I stared at her.

Martha conspicuously took her time to answer. “You are not as strong as you used to be, John. You’re more human.”

“You sound disappointed,” I replied.

“I’ve never felt being human was particularly admirable,” Martha replied.

“A strange sentiment for a human supremacist,” Blackman said, changing the documentary to one about baking.

Martha rubbed the back of the cat’s neck. “To paraphrase the words of the Pre-Rising philosopher, Vladimir Lenin, the Knights of Arkham are useful fools. The New Arkhamites had no ideology or cultural identity to preserve upon their arrival here but our humanity. Hatred became our guiding force and a misattributed sense of superiority. Human supremacy is a philosophy that can be flexible as well as effective in a city of monsters.”

“Until it gets me killed,” I replied.

Martha stared at me. “Yes.”

I took a deep breath. I shouldn’t have expected more from Martha, but here we were. “Why have you come?”

“I assumed you were the one to kill those two police officers this morning,” Martha said.

“How did you figure that out?” I asked.

“Psychometry,” Martha said, lifting her gloved hands. “Object reading. I admit, I was surprised to see a vision of you killing two police officers sent to guard your grave, but not that much.”

And yet, they hadn’t recognized me and had antagonized me to the point of getting themselves killed. It occurred to me—not with too long of a period to think about it either—that Martha had expected that sort of result as well. Her vision of me was a kind of unthinking monster that would violently destroy anything in its way. Perhaps she was right, but that had been a long time ago and that was a creature I’d put in the past.

Hopefully.

“That must cut down on detective work considerably,” I replied, trying to keep my expression even.

“It allows me to know who is guilty and innocent, but that has absolutely nothing to do with who is chosen to be prosecuted and punished,” Martha said. “The law is as great a lie as the gods caring about our well-being and a moral life being worth living.”

“Depends on your morals,” Jessica said, not at all mollified.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” I said, keeping my gaze focused on her.

Martha frowned. “Forgive me, it is difficult dealing with you. I figured with your ensuing humanity that your mind would be easier to read. Instead, it remains as blank and unreadable as ever. I believe that was part of our issues while married. Even at your most apparent mortal, you were surface thoughts only.”

“You would have trusted me more if you could read my mind?” I asked.

“I could have manipulated you better,” Martha said. “We have an enemy in the White Gorilla.”

“Franz Jermyn,” I said, saying the name I only knew from Detective Booth’s memories.

“Yes,” Martha said. “The albino man-ape is a merchant of great wealth in addition to his power as a dreamer. He is also the High Priest of the Great

Destroyer in the City. That provides him much influence over the Knights of Arkham that he likes to exert. They are his catspaws to try to take the City from his rivals in the occult and finance."

"He sounds like a lovely fellow," I replied. "Why does he hate us?"

I was skeptical of her claims that this man was her enemy, even if I believed he was mine, because Martha had never had difficulty disposing of her enemies. Furthermore, if Franz Jermyn was the head of the Knights of Arkham and as powerful as she said, then why was *she* not in danger? How was she able to maintain her position as Chief of Police and a leader among the human supremacist group? There was an answer, but I didn't want to contemplate it: she'd given me up as a way of demonstrating her loyalty.

"He doesn't hate us," Martha said. "He hates our son."

Chapter Fifteen

"Gabriel," I said, grunting.

"The richest man in the city is scared of a movie producer?" Jessica asked, choosing to stress his wealth over his control of sorcery. That told me a great deal about how power was measured in this place.

"Stories have power in the Dreamlands, Copy Jessica," Martha said, staring. "A good half of this city is made up of stories given life and human form by my son's will. Randolph Carter laid the groundwork, but it was the harvesting of dreams from other worlds that populated it. Franz Jermyn and other wizards among the city fathers populated this place to build themselves a kingdom. They did not expect a rival to come from a dead Earth and start weaving his own dreams, let alone invite in tens of thousands of demihumans to wear human skins and pretend at being people."

"Gabriel did all of that?" I asked, stunned. "He was a boy when I left him."

"That was a long time ago, John," Martha said. "Longer than you'd imagine. He is also not a human being but a Kastro'vaal like yourself, even if you hide it. When the change overtook him, he embraced it and became capable of doing things the city fathers had to make unholy pacts and sacrifice their humanity to achieve."

I tried—this time deliberately—to think of Detective Booth's memories, to invoke what had previously been accidental and seemingly more curse than blessing. To my surprise, it seemed to work, at least partially. I could see in my mind's eye a collection of five figures and their extended family of gods, corpse-mages, and horrors that had once been people. The city fathers had fled here from my world, or someplace so similar as to not matter, before turning the City into their private kingdom. One threatened by my son's ability to weave dreams like a storyteller wove words.

I could not see them clearly enough in my borrowed memories to be able to know their identities beyond that of Franz Jermyn. I did, however, know that they weren't friends with one another. Their alliance was a shaky one, with none of them willing to lift a finger—or tendril—to help the other. That was, at least, something of a relief.

"I see," I replied. "And Anita? What happened to her?"

Martha's expression dropped. It was one of the rare displays of emotion I'd seen.

"I fear she did not take the transformation as well as you did, John. When the change into your species started to overtake her, she killed her paramour and fled into the Wasteland. I do not know what happened to her thereafter. I assume she either killed herself, was killed, or tried to find you."

Her words were sharp knife that slashed across my face and chest before plunging themselves into my heart. Toward the end of my treks throughout the Wasteland, I had kept telling myself that everyone I'd known as dead. However, each hour I had spent in the Dreaming City had been an embarrassment of riches. People I'd long given up for dead had turned up alive and restored to health.

I did not believe in Heaven, or at least I did not believe in one for people like myself. Certainly, any paradise I would envision would be a gritty, grimy, and violent place where monsters lived among people. As much a Hell as Heaven. Yet, I'd allowed myself to believe I would be able to see my children again.

"I know what that look means," Martha said, looking at me.

"Which is?" I asked.

"You wish I had died instead of her," Martha said.

I stared at her.

"I do not believe in equitable exchange regarding death. There is no such animal."

"Tell that to the Great Old Ones," Jessica said.

"Tell that to you," Martha said. "My son's world has you in it, but not his sister. A toy for his father—"

Jessica shot the couch cushion beside Martha's head. The noise was surprisingly subdued, and I noted her pistol had some sort of air device built into the side of it to muffle the noise. A silencer. It was still loud but more like a firecracker than a gunshot.

Blackman looked up, annoyed.

"Please watch where you're firing that thing. Also, that's my couch."

"It's my couch," Jessica said.

"If you believe humans can own property, perhaps," Blackman replied.

Martha cast a sideways glance to the bullet beside her head before turning back to face Jessica. "I'll refrain from making insults towards your

existence, Jessica."

"Thank you," Jessica replied. "Besides, how do you know you're the real Martha? Maybe your kid dreamed you up as well."

Martha blinked. "You raise a valid point. I have no way to verify whether or not I am a product of my son's dreams."

"Freud would have a field day," Jessica said.

"More like Jung," Martha retorted. "But John can't prove he is the real thing either."

She had me there. I remembered the corpse next to Mister Death's body in my vision of the dead world consumed by Yog-Sothoth. Was that just another hallucination, a vision of another world, or an actual glimpse into reality that said I had transcended my physical flesh to become a dreamwalker? In what way was that distinguishable from death? At least as most afterlife possessing religions described the undiscovered country?

I need to stop thinking about such nonsense and focus on this case.

The case.

I was already starting to think like Detective Booth. Was I sharing his memories? Merging with him somehow? Or was the fact I was standing here in his clothing, having fucked his wife, and taken over his office simply enough to make me start becoming my doppelganger? Yeah, this was definitely an existential crisis.

"Is my son linked to the Dreaming King?" I asked, wondering if this was yet another clue on my strange path. Solving the mystery given to me by the Tree of Azathoth might not keep me from going mad, but at least it would keep me from thinking about how fucking weird this all was.

"I have no idea," Martha said. "The Dreaming King is a legend in the City. Most people—who I point out believe in almost anything—do not believe it exists. It is a legend in a world where the outside is literally a product of imagination."

It was a hard concept to grasp and probably beyond the comprehension of even an immortal being like a Kastro'vaal: the idea that the City was an island of stability in a vast swirling sea of chaos. Or perhaps it was an island of sanity in an ocean of madness. And if the sane were vastly outnumbered by the mad, did that make the sane the madmen?

Yep, I was not getting anywhere avoiding philosophical gibberish.

"I see," I replied. "That would indicate that my next stop should be Gabriel's film studio. My son may have insights that I've yet to discern."

Martha snorted. “You have the most appalling habit of hearing but not listening. You go to Yellow King Studios, and you will be gunned down like a dog. The White Gorilla’s men watch that place like no other.”

“And what would you suggest?” I asked.

“Don’t let her manipulate you, John,” Jessica said, keeping her gun aimed at Martha.

“I’m not,” I said, dryly. “I don’t suppose you have anything stronger than water or milk here?”

“There’s beer in the fridge,” Jessica said.

“Thank you, gods,” I muttered. At this point, I needed something significantly harder, but I hadn’t been able to properly digest alcohol for decades. I wanted to move up slowly while keeping my wits about me. Heading to the fridge, I pulled out a brown glass bottle and twisted off the cap before drinking it. It had a warm, earthy, mushroom-like taste that made me believe it was made from more than hops. It didn’t matter, because it was welcomed by my stomach.

“I need you to kill Franz Jermyn,” Martha said, as if asking for the last slice of cheese. “Once he’s dead, his control over the Knights of Arkham will collapse and I will be able to move in to take over from his lieutenants. From there, I will be able to pardon you and keep them out of your business.”

“Bullshit,” Jessica said, shaking her head. “Even if John did kill Jermyn, you’d just toss him to the wolves so you could solidify your place.”

“That would be the most logical course of action,” Blackman said, looking up at Martha.

“Except I wouldn’t,” Martha said, looking down.

“You’ll have to explain your reasoning,” Blackman said, his gaze penetrating in the way only a cat’s can be.

“Booth has already come back from the dead once,” Martha replied. “Jessica is also resurrected, though in a kind of caricature-esque way. As if someone polished her like a gemstone and smoothed away the rough interesting bits.”

I had no idea what was going on in Jessica’s head as her expression remained even, but I imagined it was how much she’d have to apologize if she ventilated my ex-wife’s head here and now. Possibly wondering whether I’d thank her. Which I would not. Despite all the miseries she’d

caused me—and apparently my doppelganger here—she was still the mother of my children.

“I’m not sure I buy such a flattering explanation,” I replied. “Even I feel that killing the most powerful man in the City is actually a way to secure my future here.”

“You’re a killer, John,” Martha said, as if she was describing a fact as obvious as the rain. “No matter what reality you come from, you are one. It is an inborn quality like Gabriel’s capacity for making film or Anita’s skill at shooting, little good as that quality did her in the end. You can get past the White Gorilla’s guards and eliminate him as you did Doctor Ward.”

“Doctor Ward got a good chunk of my squad killed and also took an army,” I replied.

“Be better this time,” Martha said, dismissing my concerns. “But I can give you the reasons you should do this.”

“Which are?” Jessica asked.

“One, this is your only lifeline,” Martha said. “If you don’t have me as a friend then you have no friends whatsoever. The Knights of Arkham will eventually learn you are still alive and send assassins after you until you are dead. They’re already targeting Jessica and will soon move onto Jackie. They would have moved onto her already if not for the fact that as a ghoul, she has her own protections. The flesh-eaters have their own power in the city and do not hesitate to protect their own with violence.”

“Do not use that slur in this apartment,” Jessica said.

Martha shook her head, dismissively as if calling Jackie a racial epithet was the least of our worries right now.

“As you wish.”

“You were almost assassinated tonight,” I replied. “Three dead knights in the sewers.”

“I was there, John,” Jessica said. “I’m happy to make it twenty or fifty.”

“You will die long before then,” Martha said. “They’re not going to face you in trial by combat. It will be a car bomb, a sniper, or perhaps even a drive by shooting. Things against which you cannot face. It might be best that you go into hiding.”

“Or perhaps they’ll hire you to rescue a kid and ambush you,” I muttered.

“Whose side are you on?” Jessica asked, finally putting away her gun. Given she was still wearing a bedsheet, she placed it on the kitchenette

counter.

“Right now?” I asked. “Mine. What are the other two reasons?”

“The second is that the White Gorilla is an existential threat to the people of this city,” Martha said. “Franz doesn’t believe in our son’s vision. He wants to fill this city with nothing but his fellow humans.”

“He’s not human, though,” I replied, remembering the look of the man.

“He’s close enough,” Martha said. “He already eliminated all of the zoogs and recruits more disadvantaged humans every day.”

“Recruiting humans to hunt monsters is like recruiting lambs to hunt the wolves,” I replied.

“This is the Dreamlands,” Martha said. “All he has to do is get enough to believe and perhaps he’ll just wish them away. After all, there are nine humans of pure blood for every demihuman of mixed or pure strains. Of course, at the end of the day, the big difference is mostly cosmetic. Red ants versus black ants, with this little spot of cityscape being the leftover detritus of a human who became a god. There are plateaus, kingdoms, and realms in the Dreamlands where man would be as unimportant as the gum on a movie theater floor. R’lyeh is on the far shores of explored territory and is populated by mile tall Cthulhuoids that pay homage to the god of the Deep Ones.”

“I’ll make a note to avoid that place,” I replied. “You mentioned three reasons, though.”

“I’ll pay you twenty thousand dollars,” Martha said.

I snorted. “Money?”

“Spoken with the disdain of someone who has never had to live in a society based around it,” Martha said. “Yes, money. I think you’ll find it quite useful in this world.”

“There were mediums of exchange in the Wasteland,” I replied.

Martha smiled at my ignorance.

“How much?” Jessica asked, surprising me.

Jessica’s reaction surprised me, but perhaps not as much as it might have before recent events. I was getting used to the rules that governed this strange place and that included the little pieces of cloth in my wallet which were stronger than most bullets.

“Twenty thousand,” Martha replied.

“An interesting blood price for your dead husband,” Jessica said.

“He was yours too,” Martha said, smirking. “I’m surprised you didn’t think lower would be fair.”

I’d be insulted, but that was a fair cop. “You think I should take this, Jessica?”

“*We* should take this,” Jessica said. “The White Gorilla is after me too. He has his fingers in many pies and if we don’t take him down before he realizes you’re still alive, he’ll bring his whole army down on us.”

“It may be too late for that,” Martha said. “The body count is already rising, and the omens are poor for him. That’s another reason I’ve chosen you to be my champions.”

“Because you wouldn’t side with us if the omens favored him?” I asked.

Martha smirked, not giving an answer. I hoped it was her idea of a joke, but the question was whether or not the punchline was on me. It was nicely illustrative of our relationship that I knew she’d set me up to be ambushed—using a kidnapped little girl no less—and yet I still couldn’t bring myself to fully distrust her.

That was when Martha’s coat pocket made an odd buzzing noise. She reached into it, Jessica looking at her gun before she removed one of those strange crystal phones that I’d seen so many of the citizens using.

“Yes?” Martha asked.

“I don’t like you taking calls in my house,” Jessica said.

Martha made a dismissive gesture that would have been offensive but for the fact it would probably be a bad idea for any of her subordinates to hear Jessica’s distinctive voice. That was another thing that had changed: Jessica once had a Texas drawl that she’d created as an affectation from old movies and books. This Jessica spoke very much like a city girl and with the accent she’d possessed in those rare unguarded moments where she wasn’t using her Texas drawl like a shield.

“I see,” Martha said, her voice lowering. “No, thank you for informing me. Yes, I’ll show up there tomorrow. No, I don’t think I’ll be needed to do the identification. He was one of the most famous citizens of the City.”

My blood ran cold.

“Goodnight,” Martha said, hanging up her crystal phone.

“What happened?” I asked, not wanting the answer.”

Martha stared down as if taking the moment to decide on her answer. “I fear we may be too late in our desire to eliminate Franz Jermyn, John.”

She never called me John.

“Why?” I asked.
“Our son has been murdered.”

Chapter Sixteen

"This is a bad idea," Martha said, sitting in the passenger side of Jessica's car. Jessica was sitting in the back, wearing a blue coat, white-shirt, blue jeans, and a man's hat. Blackman was sitting with us, seemingly accompanying us for boredom more than anything else.

I was driving even though I barely remembered how to after so many years since the last motor vehicles had broken down in the aftermath of the Rising. The Blue Meanie had probably been the last car in the world and had given up the ghost ten or fifteen years before due to the hard conditions it had been forced through.

The storm from earlier had continued beating down, but the sun was about to rise in the east or perhaps it was the west. Did such directions have any real meaning when you were probably on a floating island rather than a planet?

I wasn't familiar with the City's layout, Byzantine as it might be, nor was I aware of what were the various traffic laws that guided matters. I was the one forcing us all to go to the Yellow King Studios, though, so I kept control over the wheel. Besides, it wasn't especially difficult to figure out them all. Just do what every other car in the area was doing.

"I believe you," I replied, slowly getting the hang of the militaristic formation in which the cars moved. Honestly, they were a waste of the city's efforts as there wasn't that much of a place to move them about before you reached the endless black ocean or the wild Dreamland beyond.

The City was perhaps the size of Old New York or maybe the New England Wasteland, including all the land outside it that provided most of the city's food. Few would ever drive outside the City limits proper and public transit would have been a better use of everyone's resources.

"Then why are we going?" Martha asked. "You will be announcing yourself to the world, and my own protection of you."

I tried not to react to the word protection as, even sarcastically, it was a ridiculous use of the term.

"We are going because my son's body is there, and I have to look upon it with my own two eyes before it is disposed of."

I'd borrowed a fresh load of fire glyph bullets from Jessica's drawer—creations of Detective Booth—and now had six more to fire at my enemies.

If I'd had more time, I would have crafted a variety of them, but these magical objects were usually enough to deal with my problems. I didn't know if I'd have to kill anyone when I arrived at the studio but, given my son had been murdered, I hoped to do so.

Martha crossed her arms. "Madness."

"Forget it, John, it's Angelwood," Jessica said in the back. "You're not going to find any answers there."

"Angelwood?" I asked.

"A big bunch of ranches in the hills that our son bought and turned into his film studios," Martha replied. "The dreams of the Pre-Rising Earth allowed it to be molded into a place for the country gentry and fame hungry."

Which was a polite way of saying it was a replica of Hollywood that my son had created with manipulation of reality and others wanting to have such a place exist in the Dreaming City. I didn't know much about the Old World, but I'd seen enough surviving movies to know the general gist of the place—so had Gabriel. Randolph Carter had created this place, but it seemed increasingly likely that my son had shaped it.

"This place seems more and more like a playset for someone enjoying the Old Word," I muttered, taking a turn and heading onto a massive, mile-long bridge across the bay toward the exterior of the City. It ran right past a view of the statue of the Dreaming King in the harbor and I couldn't shake the feeling that it was watching me.

"That's what happens when you live in a place where thought becomes reality," Martha said. "I'm honestly surprised that it has worked out as well for as it has. I expected the Dreamlands to be innately hostile to human life the way our world became. Well, before it was destroyed."

"You seem awfully okay with that," Jessica said.

"One must accept realities, no matter how unpleasant," Martha said. "Abraham Lincoln said that it was possible for every man to overcome adversity. He also said that if you want to find the true measure of a man's character then you should give him power."

"I don't care about Abraham Lincoln," I said, gritting my teeth. One of my white ancestors (through my mother's lineage) had rescued the Great Emancipator's son from a train hitting him but that was unimportant trivia. "My son is dead. You told them to keep the body where it is, right?"

“Yes, John,” Martha said. “For the third and hopefully final time. Though I don’t understand your distress.”

“You are a heartless bitch,” Jessica said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Every day of my life,” Martha said, sounding bored. “It is apparently a cultural stereotype that women are meant to be warm and nurturing, especially toward children. Even if they did not make the choice to procreate of their own volition.”

“I can assure you, I’d still think of you as an ice-cold piece of shit if you were a man,” Jessica reassured you.

“Thank you,” Martha replied. “But yes, I am distressed about Gabriel’s murder. He was a powerful ally, a good friend, and one of my few intellectual peers in the city. I was simply noting that he could very well be a parallel universe’s Gabriel, Booth, and completely unrelated to your child. You could also be a dream creature like the Jessica and the relationship between you entirely meaningless.”

It was an uncomfortable but entirely accurate statement. “Meaning exists entirely within our heads, Martha. What is important to me is beyond my control. Whether Gabriel is or is not my son in this reality doesn’t matter because I believe him to be. You just can’t change the way you feel because of facts. Feelings transcend them.”

“How revolting a concept,” Martha replied. “Mind you, I note that you didn’t think to visit your son in twenty years of being an exile. Your relationship with your son didn’t seem to matter much to you then.”

“You’re right,” I conceded. “I was a coward.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Martha said. “I was merely expressing that you seem to be more determined to care about Gabriel now that he’s dead than you were while he was alive.”

“We’re still on the bridge, John,” Jessica said. “I can shove her out the door into the ocean.”

“No,” I said, only half-certain she was joking.

The thing was that I couldn’t argue with Martha’s reasoning. I’d been an abysmal father and my attempts to bond with my children had been limited by my own all-too-human fears. Even before I’d discovered the horrifying secret about our alien blood, I’d kept my distance from them.

My father, Marcus Booth, had tried to murder me after killing my mother for a combination of her adultery, her alcoholism, and his own

inadequacies. The fact she was his cousin only made the entire thing grosser and I was almost glad he'd not provided the seed that spawned me. I'd tried to forgive him, blame PTSD or an addiction to pills, but years in the Wasteland had convinced me I'd been a fool to ever think of him as anything but a human monster. That didn't exactly leave me with a proper set of role models to model a father-child relationship, and the closest thing I'd ever had was Doctor Alan Ward—and we saw how that ended.

A part of me couldn't help but wonder how the Kastro'vaal who'd sired me had done so. Had it been some Wasteland traveler she'd met at a bar, a manifestation of Nyarlathotep doing some sort of nightmarish Immaculate Conception, or had Doctor Ward done secret experiments on her as he'd done to so many other patients under his care?

There had been a time I'd thought Doctor Ward might have been my biological father despite the difference in our skin tones—I favored my mother's Sub-Saharan features—but that seemed irrelevant right now. A question that probably would never have an answer and even if it did, what would be the point of having it?

"I have been a terrible father," I replied, simply acknowledging the reality behind me. "I was more a father to Anita than Gabriel, and far more of one to Jackie than both of my biological children. But if I can't make up for my mistakes with him while he was alive, I can certainly avenge them after his death."

"I'm sure that will be a great comfort to one who is beyond caring," Martha said. "It does make me curious, though, Jessica what your family is up to."

Jessica crossed her arms and stared forward. "Robert and Howard joined the Temple of Bast sex cult. I don't know what happened to their father."

Blackman snorted. "Humans worshiping cats must make it weird. They should just give us proper veneration like obedience and pets."

I tried to piece together the ages of everyone here. Robert and Howard were children when they'd died. "How old are they?"

"Old enough," Jessica replied. "Time works differently here."

"How differently?" I asked.

"I've been here a hundred and eighty years, give or take," Martha said, stunning me. "The ravages of time seem to have stopped for many and slowed down for the rest. Sometimes it catches up all at once, but I can't describe how the rules of this fairyland function."

“One hundred and eighty years.” I was gobsmacked by that little detail and wondered how it had slipped my mind.

“A grain of sand in the hourglass to some of the people who have lived here,” Martha said. “It is also why I am very determined to make sure the bubble of normality we live in isn’t popped.”

“Is it in danger of doing so?” I asked.

“The omens say so,” Martha replied. “The Dreaming King will wake up and doom will come to the City. All of this will vanish along with everyone and everything in this place. Unless…”

“Unless?” Jessica asked.

“Either the Dreaming King’s slumber becomes eternal, or someone takes the mantle from him and dreams in his place,” Martha said. “This is the subject that currently occupies the mind of the city elders. Perhaps the one time their plotting is justified.”

“The Tree of Azathoth said so in as many words,” I muttered.

“Interesting,” Martha said. “It seems you are the Chosen One. Our destined savior sent by the gods to deliver us from evil.”

“You don’t have to sound so mocking,” I muttered.

Martha snorted. “You must have known a very different Martha Booth then.”

No, I hadn’t.

“Too bad we’re past the bridge,” Jessica muttered.

“The best way to deal with the gods is to never attract their attention,” Blackman said. “Like mice with cats.”

“Or hope they’re too lazy to chase you,” Jessica said to the cat.

“That too,” Blackman said.

“The simple fact is if they cared, they would be with you and vice versa,” Martha said.

“Because you were such a good mother,” Jessica said.

“I never claimed to be,” Martha replied. “Nor wanted to be.”

The rest of the car ride was mostly silent as we drove outside the city limits, and it became a much different sort of place. Surrounding the city were countless small farms, ranches, and old decaying mansions that had their own strange lack of consistency.

The forests, plains, and buildings felt less real, as if their creator knew they were necessary for the sustaining of their vision but did not particularly care about their specifics. Instead, they had been popped up by

scattered memories and visions of rural bliss. There was something oppressive about the place, far more so than in the city and I could only imagine the countless horrors hidden under floorboards or locked away in attics.

I drove across the single long freeway until it brought us beneath an enormous sign formed from white painted stone: Angelwood. Like a strange mixture of Easter Island with the long capital of the American west coast. A whole valley had been cleared away and fenced off to create its various movie studios for the ten or twenty million people of the City.

From the top of the valley, I could see a smaller city catering to a variety of different environments that seemed conjured from Earth's long-dead past. There was even a fake pseudo-R'lyeh with fake towers and props visible around a towering statue of Cthulhu.

"This seems excessive," I replied, noting our car would need its battery charged soon. "Why would you have a mile long land of make believe when you already live in a land formed from imagination?"

"The people need movies to help them dream because they live in the dreams of the powerful," Blackman said. "Besides, you should be grateful, there's a Wasteland replicated down there for the Esoteric Easterns that the public loves."

"I hate those," Jessica muttered. "They're so inaccurate."

"How would know?" Martha asked. "You've never been there."

Jessica didn't respond, though I was pretty sure Martha would get pistol whipped before this was over. Thankfully, for Jessica's sake, Martha wasn't telekinetic. Unfortunately, for Jessica, a telepath had far nastier ways of hurting someone.

"So, Yellow King Studios," I said, starting the vehicle down the valley.

"You can't miss it," Martha said. "It's the one with the gold sigil over the entrance."

"I take it was funded by the Yellow Kings?" I asked, remembering the unofficial rulers of Kingsport before its takeover by New Arkham. The gang of Ezekiel King. All of them were worshipers of Hastur.

Truth be told, I knew very little of Hastur and everything I did know about the Great Old One was contradictory. Sometimes he was a monster, a god, a place, or an idea. The legends around Cthulhu were mostly consistent and the same for the Other Gods. Hastur worshipers were utterly inconsistent as to what their god was, wanted, or how he appeared. Was he

a god of shepherds, artists, madness, decay, magic, undeath, disease, or all the above? Some utterly insane stories—which was saying something given the things I'd encountered—stated he was Cthulhu's brother, while others named him as the son of Nyarlathotep.

My own association with the Great Old Ones and the gods above them told me he was probably unfathomable and all those beings attempting to touch his—or her or its—mind were just driving themselves mad. The Great Old Ones did not want our worship and did not answer our prayers. Thank God (with full awareness of the irony).

"Yes," Martha said. "Ezekiel King's power ebbed and almost vanished under New Arkham. He was an old man brooding over past glories when he made the long trek across the Wasteland to the City with the rest of us. He soon found himself invigorated and funded Gabriel's film studio once he'd made a fortune in narcotics as well as other illegal items."

The idea of items being illegal was strange enough to me, even those that might be lethal. In the Wasteland, no one cared what you did to your body as it was your responsibility. It ended in plenty of dead bodies the next morning, but *caveat emptor*.

"It's good to know someone made out well," I said, not commenting on the fact that apparently all of the refugees had done so because they were alive when the world ended and apparently in a land of immortality. Mind you, that should have been more reassuring than it was but I couldn't help thinking that it portended even worse consequences.

"Not as well as you think," Jessica said. "They were supposed to do a production of the *King in Yellow* play and it ended up being a production that resulted in complete disaster. Gabriel eventually bought out Ezekiel's share in the business before releasing a bunch of hits: musicals, easterns, and comedies."

"I imagine he had a lot of time in two hundred years," I muttered, rounding the figure a bit.

"As long as they have guns and skin, it's a Booth film," Martha replied.

I tried not to laugh before it occurred to me. "So, what you're saying is our son crossed a crime lord and cheated him out of a fortune in movie residuals?"

Memories of my son and the uncomfortable relationship he'd had with Detective Booth flooded back. They were not as vivid or impressive as my other visions, but were scattered images and reminiscences that provided

me a few insights I might otherwise have not possessed. Really, it felt like cheating, as if the puppet master behind all this wanted me to know.

Gabriel drinking heavily and surrounded by beautiful, half-dressed partners of both sexes at sleazy parties.

A woman I didn't recognize disgusted by his behavior and reaching out to me. She was important to Gabriel.

A failed attempt at reconciliation between us.

Gabriel covered in tattoos, partaking in the worship of Hastur and the wild revelries his parties were only an introduction to.

A typewriter writing by itself.

An antediluvian door, built by nonhuman dreams.

"*Get out, Father. You cannot understand what I am building here.*"

The door opened.

A darkness spilled out and consumed everything.

"Yep," Jessica said, shaking me from my vision. "Gabriel had more enemies than friends. Men and women easily fell in love with him but just as easily fell out. He was also a wizard as well as a ruthless businessman. Both of those types are prone to pissing people off as a matter of course."

"So, it might not have been the White Gorilla who killed him," I replied.

"Indeed," Martha said. "That is an unfortunate possibility. Though I would not hesitate to kill Franz anyway."

Martha, clearly, was more concerned with the enemy she'd made than her own son's death. It was more callous than I'd expected even from her but, apparently, she was two centuries older. I was surprised she was recognizably human in her behavior.

With that, I arrived at the gates to Yellow King Studios.

The Yellow Sign was marked above it.

Chapter Seventeen

The Yellow Sign was a symbol I'd seen thousands of times in the Wasteland. Like the Elder Sign, it became synonymous with a desire by the scattered survivors of humanity to take back some measure of control from the Great Old Ones that had conquered the Earth. But just as the Elder Sign was a tendril-like star with no power behind it other than what a human soul could place into it, so was the Yellow Sign just three crescent moons on top of one another unless you could will enough magic into it to have power.

Symbols of power were like that. The pentacle, the cross, the eye and the pyramid were all sacred to countless individuals throughout history but unless believers bled part of their spirit into them, they were just drawings. That was the nature of all glyphs and lettering to an extent. All writing contained a bit of the essence of the author, but only that which was made by a dreamer could wield power of its own.

This Yellow Sign had power.

I did not know if my son had forged the symbol himself or had somehow enchanted it, but it caused me to suffer a terrible migraine looking at it. The Yellow Sign was linked to inspiration and madness both. A person could contemplate its power for years, only to become one of the greatest artists in history or a gibbering lunatic. It was profoundly irresponsible to put it out in a public place—if not outright evil—but I knew my son's proclivities.

Or Detective Booth did.

It was a test.

"John?" Jessica asked. "Are we going in or not?"

"Yes," I said, driving up to a security guard's station. It had a barrier gate but little in the way of other security. I struggled to figure out what I was going to say when the guard, an obese man with pale pock-marked skin and gills on one of his double chins looked at me only for a moment before opening the gate.

"Welcome, Mr. Booth," the security guard said.

I didn't respond before driving in. "It appears I'm known here."

"You were a regular feature here," Martha said. "You served as Yellow King Studio's fixer?"

"Fixer?" I asked.

“You fixed things,” Jessica said, disapproval in her voice. “Drying out drug addicted talent, handling labor disputes, intimidating journalists, and sleeping with the occasional star.”

The interior of YK Studios was mostly row after row of hanger-looking studios, a large parking lot, offices, and other mundane facilities. I found myself somewhat disappointed as I’d half expected the place to look like some of the giant outdoor sets I’d seen from above. Instead, Gabriel’s facilities seemed far more closed off and secretive. The only thing of true note were the large number of police cars and a crowd gathered around Studio Fourteen. Strangely, the numbering for the studios went one to twelve then fourteen, skipping over the thirteenth. It was an odd bit of superstition to abide by in a place with real magic, but I knew plenty of otherwise learned individuals who put stock in astrology.

“That doesn’t sound like me,” I said, bringing the car to a reserved parking lot. I didn’t know who it was for, nor did I care.

“Doesn’t it?” Martha asked.

Great, now they were teaming up against me. “Let’s just say that I had a very different impression of Detective Booth.”

I didn’t want the memories that came to mind when they spoke about his activities here. They were a marked contrast to the ones where I was attempting to fight slavers or rescue children. Wild decadent parties, beatings delivered in back allies, and affairs in dressing rooms. There were a few murders as well, but I couldn’t tell what my reasons were, whether they were justified or just for profit.

“My Booth was a great man,” Jessica said, sounding wistful but not as reverent as before, despite her words. “However, he would do anything for Gabriel. It was his way of making up for being absent from his life—”

“For two hundred years?” I suggested, not sure I could cope with the unnatural, otherworldly nature of time here. It was strange that was the one thing that I couldn’t cope with after a lifetime of the weird and strange.

“Yes,” Martha said. “It is the nature of time that it exists within a bubble. A million years could pass between areas of the Dreamlands and only a few moments in the physical universe. This little pocket universe we dwell in might have a whole vast life equal to the universe we came from, but it could pop with no sign it ever existed.”

“Is being an enormous killjoy a thing you and Booth share naturally, or is it something you taught to one another?” Jessica asked.

“I’m not interested in philosophizing,” I said, something that would be a lie at any other time. “I’m trying to solve my son’s murder. If he was involved in shady activities, that creates more suspects.”

“Like I said, Booth,” Jessica uttered as she grimaced, “your son has an endless list of enemies. Also, if you’re going be asking about shady activities, you’ll find every man, woman, child, and other in the City are guilty.”

There was an uncomfortableness to her reactions, as if we were touching on an area that bothered her. So much of this Jessica seemed to be enjoying the life of a detective but she’d alluded to how her relationship with the other Booth had been less happy than she’d initially implied. I understood that as well. She was a beautiful, living soul but this place had a falseness to it that could easily crawl into your brain and eat away at the happiness one might have achieved.

Jessica was a Jessica, but not my Jessica. She was a product of magic and dream, that seemed almost undeniable now. But who had created her? Me? Detective Booth? The Dreaming King? Some other supernatural entity that was attempting to manipulate me? It would be easy to let paranoia and suspicion undermine any emotional connection we might forge.

I also understood the hints she and Martha were both making that I’d done terrible things on behalf of my son. This part bothered me less than it probably should, I was under no delusions that I was a good man and I’d lost those feelings long ago in the Wasteland.

And just like that, I was once more in the past. It was becoming annoying now and I was wondering if these were really my memories or if someone was pulling me through time. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was going to result in me passing out during the middle of driving or the middle of a firefight.

“We’re using them as bait,” I muttered, staring out from the top of the cliff face onto the valley below. Gamma Squad was standing beside me, and we had numerous pieces of observation equipment erected, some of it looking brand new as if they had been vacuum sealed since the Pre-Rising Era. There were cameras, instruments to measure radiation, gas-powered generators, and even an old television set hooked up to a barely functioning computer. The Council of Leaders had gone all out for this mission.

Visible from my vantage point was the collection of ramshackle houses and stores that made up the village of Blacklung. Blacklung had been

strategically chosen by the Council of Leaders working with Doctor Curwen to determine the best place to implement their plan. It was a relatively small community of a hundred and fifty souls and was known for mining coal from the sides of the mountains we were presently standing on.

Coal had been useless as an energy source in the latter years of the Pre-Rising Era, a dirty and finite resource compared to better alternatives, but the needs of humanity had changed greatly in the wake of the world's end. Still, the Council was willing to sacrifice the community if it meant an end to the Color. It had proven a less than popular idea with those who were being entrusted to carry it out. Myself included.

"*Nothing gets past you, Captain, does it?*" *Stephens said, He was smoking a cigarette and I could tell that he was far less comfortable with this plan than he let on.*

"*This is the best way to lure the Color out,*" *Schmidt said, trying to keep a dignified presence. "The creature will be drawn to the life forms within the town, and we'll use the weapon to destroy it.*"

"*It's mass murder,*" *Private Thomas Garcia said. Garcia was a thin but tall man with glasses and a shaved head. "Let's not pretty it up any more than what it is. Every person in that valley is going to die. And even if they survive the Color, they're going to die in the subsequent explosion.*"

Jessica remained silent during the entirety of our arguments, caught between her desire for revenge and the fact she would be sacrificing more people to die at the hands of the thing that had killed those closest to her. I'd tried to reach out to her but there could be no healing, no salvation, until the monster in her nightmares was destroyed. Which was problematic if you were dealing with a creature that might well be immortal.

"*Do you have any better ideas, either of you?*" *Stephens asked, cutting to the heart of the argument.*

The Color had left a devastating and horrific trail of destruction in the wake of its movements. The Post-Rising world could hardly have been called lush, but it had been living and growing even if humanity had been struggling. The Color was a sign that even this had been hubris in the face of a hostile universe. It had left fifteen villages akin to Blacklung as ash, with the bodies burned so thoroughly inside and out that they crumbled at the slightest touch.

Strangely, it had not been the deaths of my fellow humans that had horrified me most—save perhaps the sanity blasting sight of what I'd found

in cribs—but the devastation to farmland and animals. The delicate equilibrium of the Wasteland's ecology constantly shifted in the best of times.

The Color's seemingly random feeding patterns were annihilating the food sources of much of the east and if it was not stopped long before it devoured the whole of humanity's survivors, we would be reduced to killing each other for a scrap of bread or a piece of meat. Stories of cannibalism were often exaggerated scary tales or confusion over the fact that ghouls did not kill for their meals, only scavenged, but they were not wholly untrue either.

"No," Garcia said, coldly. "I don't."

But I knew the truth. Doctor Ward had developed a way to lure the Color to the location we desired. It had not been shared with the others because it relied on ancient invocations and words found in a book called The Unimaginable Horror. *Combining them with the secrets of the Elder Gods found in the* Re'Kithnid, *and a set of incense sticks coated in the fat of stillborn children would bring the Color hundreds of miles off course to our trap for it.*

There was no need to offer up the village of Blacklung as a human sacrifice to the accursed thing, but Doctor Ward had agreed to it anyway. There had been some vague justifications that it would weaken and solidify the creature to be more vulnerable to the atomic weapon while it was feeding, but I had asked few questions. It seemed inconceivable that a man as wise and learned as my teacher would kill hundreds of people for no other reason than to provide a cover for the fact that he was a practiced black magician.

How foolish I'd been.

Now, hearing the instruments in front of us start to go wild and seeing a nightmarish glow begin to appear over the horizon, I knew it was too late to argue.

The Color had arrived.

"John?" A voice interrupted my movement across the Wastelands of my dead world, bringing me back to the present.

It was Jessica's voice.

"Yes," I said, blinking.

"You wandered off again," Jessica said. "Are you okay?"

“The Kastro’vaal are creatures that exist between time and space like the Hounds of Tindalos or the Time-Eaters,” Martha said, dryly. “You might well be finding yourself wandering in and out of your past here in the Dreamlands where time does not exist. It was a condition that affected the other John. At least toward the end.”

“Great,” Jessica said, not commenting on the fact Martha claimed to know her husband better than her. “You’re saying John’s narcoleptic now?”

“I’m not a Kastro’vaal,” I said, lying to myself. “Not anymore. I’m human here.”

“If you say so,” Martha said. “We are all the stuff of dreams more than flesh. As malleable as thought.”

“Thank you,” I said, misinterpreting her.

“But you are a monster, John, at heart,” Martha said. “So, a monstrous dream you remain.”

I was ready to lash out at her over that comment when there was a knocking on my window. Much to my surprise, it was Jackie, wearing the cap of a cab driver and a jacket that she was sticking both hands into as if for warmth. Presumably after taking time to knock on my window.

“Jackie, what are you doing here?” I asked, feeling stupid after asking the question.

“Enjoying the view,” Jackie said. “What do you think? I work for you guys. I headed here as soon as I heard the news on the police bands.”

“I see.” I should have guessed.

“Is there any reason the Wicked Witch of the West is in the passenger seat?” Jackie asked.

“I assume she means me,” Martha replied.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Jackie said.

“You shouldn’t be here, Jackie,” Jessica said.

“And you should?” Jackie asked, semi-accusingly. “I have every right to be here as much as anyone else. There was a time I’d loved Gabriel, you know, before he proved himself to be a piece of crap. I’m here to find out who killed him and polish them off before I figure out whether to piss on Gabby’s grave or cry or both.”

“You have the strangest vernacular,” Martha said.

“And you’re a bitch,” Jackie said. “Which I can say as a female ghoul.”

It took me a second to get the joke. “You and Gabriel were involved?”

“It feels like a hundred years ago,” Jackie said. “Hell, it may have been. Time moves weird here.”

“So, I’ve heard,” I said, uncomfortable with the prospect that I might be the youngest person here by far. I also felt as if I’d missed a great number of events, like jumping into the middle of a book series. Unfortunately, I didn’t see any way to resolve that other than sitting down and asking for two centuries worth of details.

Either that or somehow becoming even more one with Detective Booth’s persona, a prospect that I was now finding frightening rather than useful. After all, there was a difference between remembering being a daring rescuer of slaves and protector of children versus your son’s pimp and hatchet man.

“Well, the natives are getting restless, and I don’t mean the Dunwych,” Jackie said, stepping aside. “If you’re going to make your dramatic entrance then now’s probably the best time.”

“Are Jermyn’s minions here?” Martha asked Jackie.

“You’re here,” Jackie said, as if that answered the question by itself.

Perhaps it did.

I stepped out of Jessica’s car and started feeling the memories of the Yellow King studio swirl around my consciousness. All of them bad. It was a sleazy, artificial, and corrupt place where countless favors were traded behind closed doors to make their tinsel epics. I knew every inch of the place as if I had walked it a thousand times and they were all filled with stories of blackmail, bribery, lies, murder, sex, and intrigue.

The Baroness, Motoko Hale, wanted an ex-lover killed because they’d sought to sell their private pictures to the smut papers as pornography.

Vincent Keaton kept himself relevant by stealing the faces of younger actors and reinventing himself a dozen times despite always being the same dreadful hack.

Poor Dorothy Kettleman, overdosed on Stygian heroin, trying to cope with the horrific thing that had happened to her.

Dave Gillman selling young men and women seeking to become actors as chattel for the Redemptionist Cult.

Barry Queegeg, who simply set himself on fire one day during the middle of shooting and burned to death before anyone could intervene. No one ever figured out why.

This was an evil place and in a way that was pettier and rawer than the black cathedrals and sinister tombs I'd visited in my years wandering the Wasteland. No number of blood-soaked altars or slaver's dens had quite the sheer two-facedness of this glittering palace of imagination.

It was with this in mind that I felt no small amount of amusement when I walked up to the crowd of people gathered around Studio Fourteen, the location of my son's murder, and cleared my throat, drawing the attention of first one and then dozens.

"Hello."

Chapter Eighteen

The reaction to my presence was the kind of thing that made one want to open with a line like, “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” Unfortunately, I could not make levity with my son’s corpse nearby on a gurney and ready to be loaded into a coroner’s truck. The sight of the body under a white sheet was enough to make the whole thing finally sink in as real and I couldn’t help but primarily feel regret.

How much time could I have spent with my son if I’d bothered to seek him out after discovering my status as the last of the Kastro’vaal? Two hundred years and change apparently. It was still hard to parse and my increasingly comingled memories with Detective Booth depicted an increasingly corrupt adult version of my remembered child. Maybe I could have prevented him from becoming so if I’d been there.

The crowd was composed of two groups of people: the studio staff and the police. The studio staff consisted of actors, stars, secretaries, and the various hangers-on that I somehow knew to be inherent to the place. There was also the Yellow King Studio security force, who were far from the night watchmen they purported to be. Most of them were former members of the Yellow Kings gang and seasoned killers.

The police were a collection of detectives, patrolmen, and the coroner’s staff. I recognized some of them, though I’d never met any. Names were on the tip of my tongue but did not immediately come to mind. I knew, instinctively, though, that they were Knights of Arkham members that I’d tangled with in the past. A shame that Detective Booth had not taken more permanent measures against them.

One—a white-skinned man with pencil-thin eyebrows and a poorly healed broken nose wearing the same sort of Fedora and trench coat that seemed to be Detective Booth’s favorite sort of attire—I knew had been involved in “my” death. His name I remembered: Malcolm Jones. He reached for his gun, and I believed in that moment he was fully prepared to kill me.

That was when a small-statured, white-haired person ran up and wrapped their arms around me. It was an unexpected gesture and immediately surprised me as my attention turned down to them. It was Penny Pritchard, “companion” of the Baroness Hale and chauffer.

Androgynous in a way that could be attractive to either sex's preference, they were dressed in overalls and wearing a cap. Penny was an effervescent ball of joy and had once opened fire with a Thompson machine gun on a crowd of bank patrons when they were still a bank robber working for the Yellow Kings.

"Booth!" Penny said, tightening their grip and burying their face in my chest. Which had the benefit of preventing Malcolm Jones from gunning me down where I stood. If he shot Penny, he'd have to answer to the Baroness, and she had her own connections that were more powerful than those of a particularly jaded PI.

"It would seem that death has no hold on you, old friend," the Baroness Motoko Hale spoke nearby, looking every bit the image of understated Angelwood royalty. She had a kerchief wrapped around her head and wore sunglasses and a heavy woolen trench coat. She was simultaneously covered in enough glamour to make her one of the most beautiful creatures among humanity.

The Eurasian woman and Detective Booth had been through many things together. She was a witch of not inconsiderable power, but there was a dark heart to her, especially when contrasted to Jessica. Numerous murders were to her name and letting me kill some of her ex-boyfriends had been her permitting me to do her a favor rather than something she'd required from me.

"So, it would seem," I replied.

I surveyed the crowd and picked out Vincent Keaton next, a weaselly looking man presently wearing the body of a handsome Black man with a shaved head. Vincent was doing his best to avoid being seen by me. He wore a fine yellow suit with a white handkerchief in his right front pocket. The arrogant actor went through bodies quickly, able to keep them only a year before they were worn out from the destructiveness of his interior consciousness. Detective Booth had once believed him simply to be a particularly corrupt sorcerer with a simple but practical form of immortality he used in lieu of becoming something inhuman.

Later, sometime shortly before his death, Detective Booth had come to suspect that Keaton was something older and more alien. A body stealing creature from the primordial epoch that he'd once known the name of but had forgotten. Detective Booth had let him do his foul trade of body

swapping for reasons I did not understand, but knew related to the fact Vincent was valuable to his/our son.

Damn.

There were more rogues and recognizable faces among the crowd, but I suspected it was these four that were the ones most likely to have killed Gabriel. They were uniquely dangerous among the lesser talents surrounding them and somehow, I believed my son would have required someone like that to put him down. Maybe it was just misplaced arrogance on my part.

“You’ll have to tell me how you survived,” the Baroness said with uncomfortable familiarity. She glanced over at Jackie and Jessica. “Once we’re alone.”

I frowned and gently forced Penny away. I could tell she’d picked my pockets, and either stole my wallet or, more likely, had planted something on me. Practitioners loved to plant talismans. I removed a tiny doll they’d placed there before dropping on the ground, crushing it under foot.

“I’m afraid not,” I replied. “I have more pressing matters to deal with right now.”

The Baroness looked disappointed in a manner that told me I was missing some secret clue or message. Unfortunately, I couldn’t care less about what my doppelganger was up to at this point. Instead, I pushed my way through the crowd—even bumping into Malcolm Jones and giving him a condescending smile—before reaching the gurney bearing my son’s corpse.

“You’re not allow—” One of the patrolmen tried to stand in front of me.

I stared at him and somehow, whether in sympathy for a grieving father or pants-wetting terror of a man known as a killer, it resulted in him stepping aside. The others didn’t attempt to intervene, and I appreciated that small courtesy despite how much I hated the police in my short time as a resident of the City.

I went to the side of my son’s corpse and proceeded to move the sheet aside from his head and stared at his face. It was the first time I had seen my son outside of Detective Booth’s memories and the sight was something that left me unable to move for a moment.

Gabriel Howard Booth was a man of mixed race but bore the same strange albinism as his mother, a condition his sister had not. The right side of his face was deformed from the pistol shot that had destroyed half of his

features, but the left side was completely unmarred. He had a kind of angelic beauty far different from my rough and tumble features but there were enough similarities to see myself in him perfected. He looked like a man just turning thirty rather than two hundred or the teenage boy I'd left behind.

Behind.

I realized now why I kept thinking of the Color event as one final transformation of my memory occurred.

"*My God*," *I said, referring still to the Judeo-Christian deity than the many horrible spirits around it. What I saw before me threatened to steal away my sanity and any lingering faith I possessed in a just world.*

Gamma Squad was gathered over the edge of the cliff and forced to serve as witness to the Color's nightmarish feeding on Blacklung. To look upon the extra-dimensional entity from distant stars was enough to drain away your hope for the future as well as any belief in your own individual importance.

The Color could not be described in mundane language. The best I can describe it is a mere approximation. It resembled nothing so much as a pulsating, scintillating, neon, prismatic rainbow turned into the gaseous form of a cloud. If that sounds beautiful rather than horrifying then you would not be wrong, but that only added to its dreadful existence as its mesmerizing light patterns reached down to pluck screaming men, women, and children up, then crumble them to ashes.

I was reminded of the surreal explanation by Doctor Ward that the color fuchsia or magenta did not actually exist. It was a balance between blue and red that would normally appear as yellow, but since human eyes lacked yellow color receptors—in fact, the color we see as yellow is a mix of green and red—it did not register as such because there was no green. The colors were an illusion that our brain created to make sense of something it did not possess the capacity to perceive.

That sort of thought was an attempt to look away from the horror I'd helped unleash upon the people of Blacklung. When I'd joined the New Arkham military, I'd done so with the perhaps naive idea that I would be helping protect mankind and in my more cynical days, I admitted it was primarily to maintain New Arkham's feudalist control over its surrounding communities. Never, though, did I expect I would be the kind of person who would be ringing the dinner bell for the monsters. This was not war, it was

mass murder. All that kept me from madness was the knowledge that this would work.

"It's not working," Jessica said, staring at the sight.

"What?" I asked, feeling the bottom drop out of my stomach.

Jessica's stare was of Ahab toward his white whale. The hatred in her eyes was all-consuming and I knew she was desperate to detonate the atomic weapon that had been prepared to destroy it.

"The fucking thing isn't moving toward the cave! It's not being summoned! Doctor Ward is a moron!"

"Shit," Stephens said, staring with the first real shame and sickness I'd ever seen on his face.

"We need to call this in," Garcia said, futilely trying to shift the blame for it.

"The spells lured it here in the first place," I muttered. "We need to repeat them closer to the mine's entrance."

"Fuck that," Stephens said. "That thing's already eaten half the town."

"I will not truck with black magic," Garcia said.

I could not help but think of my son Gabriel in that moment, strangely not my daughter or wife, and decided to do something immensely foolish. Going back to one of our Jeeps, I grabbed a backpack full of the foul incense sticks that Doctor Ward had prepared extra of. He also had a hand-written copy of the Re'Kithnid*'s summoning spell inside it as well.*

Al'Kull Al'Zuul Re'Kithnid
Al'Kull Al'Zuul Yog-Sothoth
Maldra Zan-Trivalas
I speak to the spawn of the Unimaginable Horror
I speak to the spawn of the Light Unseen
I speak to the spawn of Dread Who Lies In Water
Zak Maul Tulu
Xoth!
Xoth!
Come forth!
Obey!

It sounded like gibberish and maybe it was, but a small number of humans possessed the power of Dreaming and the will to be able to force their consciousness behind the words to work these heathen sorceries. Doctor Ward had told me that, between us and Doctor Mercury Takahashi,

we were perhaps the only humans of New Arkham capable of doing so. His attempts to create sorcerers with his psychic children had failed.

I swiftly memorized the spell, perhaps too easily for the circumstance, and tossed the incense sticks back into the seats behind me. I broke a flare and tossed it on top of the incense, resulting in a large trail of blackish noxious smoke pouring out from the end of the jeep.

"John, what the hell are you doing?" Stephens asked, perhaps thinking I was going to lead the Color right to us.

He was wrong, I was going to lead the Color to the mines.

I climbed into the driver's seat and started the car.

"I'm going to make this all worth it. Detonate the nuke when its inside."

Jessica tried to get into the passenger seat, but I drove off as she had her hand on the door, causing in her to fall to the ground. I knew she was ready and willing—eager even—to die in order to get revenge on the Color. She cursed and screamed at me while I drove down the side of the cliff face, beginning the chant and attracting the attention of the Color. The magic I worked at was successful and it abandoned its nightmarish feast to chase after me.

It should have been a one-way trip.

The world would have been better off if I'd died.

I took my hand away from the corpse on the gurney, returning to the present. Well, to whatever qualified as the present in a realm where time did not properly exist. In the corner of my eye, I once more saw the Dreaming King. This time, the figure gave me a short nod as if to confirm my secret suspicions about the malevolent nature of what I'd found myself dealing with.

Gabriel was not dead.

Nor was he alive.

The figure before me was just a shell and not the first or the last of them. My son had transcended, somehow, the need for flesh in a world constructed from imaginations. His death here did not do anything to deter him and he was the one who was communicating Detective Booth's memories to me while bringing up my past thoughts of the Color incident. He had also shown me the dead world that was now closed off to me. He was making it clear that there was no turning back, like Cortez burning his ships behind him. It was within the power of the being that my son had become.

He was the Dreaming King.

The implications of this were confusing as well as elating. My son was alive, after a fashion, but transformed. He was, perhaps, the architect of this entire journey and had lured me to Mister Death or convinced the mad old shaman to send me to the Dreamlands. But I somehow didn't believe the voice I'd heard from the Tree of Azathoth, that artificial god, was Gabriel. No, I believed it to be Nyarlathotep again. If my son's plight had attracted the attention of the Messenger of the Outer Gods enough to carry it to me then there could only truly catastrophic forces at work.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I whispered. Whatever change had happened to my son had rendered him incapable of communicating with mere normal mortals. Gabriel, at least the one I'd known as a boy, was not the kind to engage in needless obfuscation or mind games. He was not like the priests of the Messenger or the Outer Gods or the various Great Old Ones, who attempted to cover up their own ignorance by speaking in riddles.

There was no answer and all I could think was the fact that the Tree of Azathoth had said my choice would be to save or kill the Dreaming King. He was linked to this city somehow, I needed to solve that mystery as well, which wasn't going to be accomplished by focusing on the death of the body here. Yet, someone clearly had wanted to kill my son and I needed to find out who.

"Such a strange situation, isn't it, Booth?" A voice spoke behind me. "Though we might be enemies, I give you a certain level of mercy given the tragedy you have suffered today."

The crowd behind me had parted and I turned to see a man who made me sick to my stomach. The egg-headed, well-muscled but ill-proportioned Franz Jermyn stared at me with his craggy features. He was one of the few individuals that I'd met who exceeded me in height.

He also was at least twice or even three times my weight, though every bit of it as solid as rock despite being impossible for a human frame. I'd met many monstrous and mutated individuals over the years but there was just something subtly off about the White Gorilla—from the swiftness of his movements to his cold, unblinking stare—that set my teeth on edge.

The man's effect on everyone else with his impeccable manners, custom-tailored suit, and palpable aura of power was enough to intimidate all but the Baroness and Jessica. Even Martha had managed to find a way to

make herself scarce in the presence of the archmage. The only other practitioner I'd ever known who had the kind of power I felt from Jermyn was the late Alan Ward, and I wondered which of the two of them would have emerged victorious.

Of course, real wizards didn't stand face-to-face and throw spells at one another like a boxing arena. The first thing most non-hedge mages did was figure out a way to make themselves immortal and then spend the rest of their lives wrapping themselves in protective spells. Wars against others of their kind were decades- and even centuries-long affairs where the slightest bit of risk had to be balanced against immense rewards.

I had to wonder how many other Pre-Rising mages had fled to the Dreamlands with the Rising. I'd known some cult leaders and mages had welcomed the dawn of the new era, only to be cruelly disabused of anything resembling a reward by the Great Old Ones' indifference. Others had desperately struggled to stave it off, only to find themselves destroyed. Alan Ward had been circumspect with his tales of the occult world Pre-Rising and while it had taken years to discover he'd apparently been a puritan sorcerer before his incarnation among the people of New Arkham, I still welcomed those secrets. Little good as they'd done him in the end.

Malcolm Jones stood beside his master and smiled at me, letting me know he'd summoned the throwback to a less evolved primate form of humanity. The smile reminded me of a child calling the teacher to intervene and made me think even less of the crooked police detective.

Neither, of course, predicted that I would just pull-out Mercury's Gift and fire it into Franz's face.

Chapter Nineteen

One might argue that straight up murdering a man in the middle of a public place, especially surrounded by police, was not the most conducive to survival reflex I had exercised. Which was verbose even my standards but, nevertheless, a very good observation. However, my attitude toward the White Gorilla was influenced by the fact that not only had he murdered my son, but I remembered his part in killing me.

Unfortunately, for me, the bullet struck a shimmering field that seemed to suck all the momentum out of the warded magical strike. It didn't even ricochet but instead just collapsed into itself and fell like a stone to the ground. Franz Jermyn, clearly unimpressed with my impromptu assassination attempt, simply stared at me with his cold simian eyes.

"Really?" Franz asked.

"Want to me arrest him, sir?" Malcolm Jones asked, clearly a great deal more shocked than his boss.

The general shock at my presence had given away to surprise at my attempted murder and its utter failure, leaving people to scramble to what they might do next. A few of the police officers had pulled their own guns, or were attempting to. They were silenced by Franz lifting his ugly, long-fingered left hand.

"No," Franz said, his voice a deep baritone. "Mr. Booth was simply performing a party trick. Weren't you, Mr. Booth?"

"No, I was trying to kill you," I said, dryly.

"Ha-ha!" Franz said, letting out a belly laugh. "Ah, I do regret how circumstances have resulted in the two of us becoming enemies."

"Mmm-hmm," I said, having overwhelming dislike and disgust for the man well up from the interior of my soul. I had no idea where it came from, save the generality of the late Detective Booth's memories, but it went beyond Jermyn killing me. There was a deep and visceral loathing inside me for this man that I'd rarely experienced before. Something generally reserved for child killers and slavers.

"Would you so kindly do me the favor of accompanying me, Mr. Booth?" Franz gestured away from the crowd. "I believe there are some matters for us to discuss and I would prefer if they were to be done semi-privately."

“I’d sooner be fed on by barracuda,” I said, twisting my lip in disgust.

All that did was amuse Franz more.

“Good, good. I like a man who speaks his mind. Too many flatterers and toadies in my line of business. People willing to debase themselves in order to join the Knights of Arkham or seek my favor as the High Priest of Azathoth.”

“Azathoth is a blind idiot god, mindless and churning madness at the heart of the universe,” I said, speaking automatically. “It’s like worshiping gravity.”

There were plenty of beings that could be classified as gods. Really, all that made a god was someone worshiping it and there were cults to endless numbers of things throughout the Wasteland. Presumably the same held true on other worlds. My opinion of religion was neither positive nor negative. Unlike the materialists of New Arkham, I did not dismiss it as mere superstition, nor did I believe religion was as some inherent good like some who clung to the faiths of their Pre-Rising forebearers.

No, instead, I viewed religion as something fundamental to the human condition as a form of pattern recognition. Evolved through chance or genetic tinkering by Elder Things, human beings collated facts about the universe into a singular coherent narrative about the way things worked. Whether you worshiped Jehovah, Buddha, or Yog-Sothoth, humans needed a sense of the way reality functioned as well as their place in relationship to such.

Traditions, taboos, and mind-images formed from this were as fundamental as breathing. Which, for better or worse, was a substantial reason why humanity was fucked. Then I found out the Mi-Go, Yithians, and other races also did it. If you believed the Dagonites, even Cthulhu itself was supposedly a High Priest of Azathoth.

So, I believed religion was a part of reality it was useless to disregard. However, it was sadly my experience most *priests* I’d met were more like men such as Franz Jermyn. Azathoth was the rolling chaos that had spawned Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep, possibly other gods, and from it all things were derived. But that meant nothing.

“It’s more like worshiping chaos,” Franz said. “Which makes him the perfect god to worship. Real except utterly uninterested in interfering with your manipulation of the gullible. Which gets me to the next point, don’t accompany me and I will gun down your associates.”

“I’d like to see you try, asshole,” Jackie said, glaring.

The White Gorilla smiled. “Charming.”

I noticed Martha had disappeared from the crowd and I wondered if she’d taken the time to make her escape from his influence or if this had somehow been a carefully baited trap from the very beginning.

“You’re not going to go with this guy, are you?” Jessica asked, looking ready to start something. Something I couldn’t exactly blame her for given I’d attempted to gun down Franz in the middle of the studio lot.

“I’ll be fine,” I lied.

“Given you have rather healthily recovered from death, I don’t doubt that,” Franz Jermyn said.

“You have more allies than you believe, Booth,” the Baroness spoke. “Ones who would be very eager to take a shot at those who believe themselves to be the masters of this City.”

It was awkward getting such a bold declaration of loyalty from someone I only barely knew of from the whispers of a dead man’s thoughts.

“I’ll be fine,” I replied, knowing there were answers I could only get from the White Gorilla. “Provided your minions decide to behave themselves.”

“Minions?” Franz said, chuckling. “Ah, how droll. It makes me sound like some sort of supervillain.”

“I don’t worry about good or evil,” I replied. “Hero or villain.”

“What *do* you worry about then?” Franz asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“With me or against me,” I replied.

Franz narrowed his beady little eyes. “You have my word that I won’t do any harm to them for the time being.”

“And why should I believe that?” I asked.

Franz smiled. “Because I need you for something, hence why I haven’t killed you again already.”

I nodded and departed from the group, aware that while I didn’t believe the man had anything resembling a code of honor, I did believe him when he said there was some sort of purpose that now required me alive versus dead. Either that or he believed, despite my failed assassination attempt, that I might be a danger to him.

“Tell me, Mr. Booth, are you aware of the difference between a religion and a cult?” Franz asked.

“One is open and public, sharing its secrets freely, the other is a mystery religion that shares its secrets only with the higher ranks,” I replied.

“One is large, and one is small,” Franz said, walking to another movie set and standing in the middle of a disturbingly accurate open-air reproduction of New Ulthar’s main street (only street, really). I saw the Wages of Sin brothel, the Sheriff’s office, and the Church of Small Gods.

“Uh huh,” I replied.

“Religions may spend years debating nonsensical questions like how Azathoth can be the center of the universe when the universe is infinite,” Franz said. “Or whether Azathoth is simply the black hole at the center of the galaxy.”

“The universe is expanding so it has to have a center,” I replied. “At least if you’re defining the Big Bang as the beginning of the universe versus whatever was outside of the universe, blank void or not.”

“Not my point, Booth,” Franz said. “Mind you, I’ve heard from your wife that despite your rough and tumble appearance, you were more philosopher than warrior.”

“I’m both I can assure you,” I replied. “My wife wanted me to kill you, you know.”

“I know,” Franz said. “I considered briefly making her my consort but determined I could do better than a filthy Wasteland mutant.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Throwing stones in glass houses, are we?”

“Clearly you are unfamiliar with my true parentage. Are you familiar with the Nazis, Mister Booth?” Franz asked.

“I’ve had the misfortune of becoming familiar with their ideology,” I replied. I’d found a priceless Encyclopedia Britannica in the ruins of New Ulthar’s previous inhabitants and learned a great deal about Pre-Rising history from its secrets. Even more than I had learned from the many books of New Arkham’s libraries.

“Horrid little men but useful fools,” Franz said. “My family were supporters of the Bund and exporters of early computational machines and hardware to the Third Reich when America was still neutral in the burgeoning European conflict. Not that much of this will have meaning to you. I, unlike my family, was not interested in mere wealth and political power. My great uncle had committed suicide when he’d discovered a terrible secret about our family, but when I pieced together what he’d found I discovered far greater possibilities.”

I stared at him. “I assume you mean that your family had inhuman ancestry if we’re being perfectly candid.”

Franz smirked his horrid ape-like face. “Not inhuman, Mister Booth, *super*human. One of my ancestors had been an explorer of Africa and during his travels there had found a lost kingdom between the non-Euclidean dimensional paths along the Earth’s ley lines.”

“The ghoul paths,” I replied.

“Far older than them,” Franz said. “This kingdom, Ultima Thule, was populated by descendants of the original uplifted ape-like strain that the Elder Things had experimented on. The primordial root species from which all the loathsome trash like the Deep Ones, serpent men, Faceless Ones, and ghouls sprang from. Let alone the fragile slave race of homo sapiens.”

“I’ll try not to take your opinion personally,” I replied.

Franz snorted. “You are Kastro’vaal and are as close to a racial equal as I’m likely to find among these things.”

I didn’t share his opinion. “What does this have to do with a short-lived fascist movement from the Pre-Rising Era?”

“The Thule had taken over the cities of the Elder Things and lived together in harmony with shoggoths,” Franz said. “But they grew decadent and indolent on their own unlimited power. Nyarlathotep gave them the tools to destroy themselves and destroy themselves they did until the great realms of old were no more in the Great Extinctions. Only a single city, the capital from which the kingdom took its name, remained by the 1940s.”

“And you found this Ultima Thule using your ancestors’ notes,” I replied, jumping ahead in what I expected to be a very long and boring story full of self-congratulations.

Franz nodded.

“I required the funding and tools of the National Socialists to find it. They hoped to find their Aryan ancestral home. Unfortunately, their small-mindedness meant that what they discovered was not the white Adonises they desired. I, however, recognized the power of Ultima Thule and was welcomed as a prodigal son. They gave me powers over the mind and taught me how to dream in such a way as to be considered magic. I made the Nazis my slaves and prepared to go forth as a new Alexander, Caesar, or —”

“Hitler,” I replied, interrupting him. “So why did you not end up as ruler of the world if your Thule race was so superior.”

Franz gave a dismissive wave. “A man named Andrew Doran interfered in the most short-sighted and stupid manner possible. There is nothing worse than a man with a little knowledge. Thule was destroyed and I became the last of our glorious legacy.”

I tried to imagine the kind of mindset where the half-breed by-blow of a dead race of ape-men believed himself to be the true Master Race. I also became disinclined to accept Franz’s statement about not being a supervillain since an ape-man Nazi sorcerer sounded like something from one of Jackie’s comic books. “And instead, you became a sorcerer.”

“Yes,” Franz said. “Enough of their knowledge remained on the psionic crystals which I stole that I was able to be at the front of humanity’s Information Age. I gathered vast amounts of knowledge from the cults of Cthulhu, Hastur, Yog-Sothoth, Shub-Niggurath, and others. I plundered the US government’s archives and made contact with Mi-Go and spirits like Hypnos.”

“And Nyarlathotep?” I asked.

Franz’s smile left his face as a look of discontent passed across his deformed, lipless mouth. “That entity and I have never had contact. It ignored all my pleas to summon it. Apparently, it has poorer taste in priests.”

Given that Nyarlathotep was willing to appear as all gods depending on his mood, I actually found a bit of amusement in Franz’s snubbing. He truly must have been a boring individual to be rejected by the God of a Thousand Faces. Still, I rejected one element of his statement. “I am not his priest.”

“If you say so,” Franz said, clearly not believing me. “All priests are his priests, and you’re the only true one left. At least from our world. Nevertheless, to make a long story short—”

“Too late,” I quoted a comedic movie called *Clue* that had been in the New Arkham library. One of perhaps a hundred or so left.

Franz narrowed his eyes.

“My vast power allowed me to survive the destruction of our shared origin world. Still, I was trapped in the Dreamlands. It was a long and difficult search for safe harbor. However, I did find the Dreaming City and set myself up here.”

“Until my son turned it from a mid-sized city into a massive metropolis,” I replied.

“Yes,” Franz said.

“Which is why you killed him,” I replied.

Franz chuckled. It was an inhuman gibbering thing. “Oh, John, no. I would never harm your son.”

“Oh?” I asked, not believing him.

“Your son is a filthy degenerate,” Franz said, speaking of him in the present tense. “He worships at the altar of Hastur and that is a worse Great Old One to follow than Cthulhu or Shub-Niggurath. At least the former only has you fuck fish and pray for the end of the world. The latter one is ruled by females and nature but at least it’s harmless. The cult of Hastur is just *wrong*.”

I had to wonder what he meant but wasn’t sure I wanted to. “I see.”

“No, you don’t,” Franz said. “Your son’s ability to dream is greater than any other sorcerer or mystic I have encountered since the Old Days. Having it touched by the diseased minds of the Yellow Sign cult is horrifying. It was why I had you killed, or tried to, since I wanted to shape and mold his ability. Gabriel, stupidly, rejected my guidance.”

“I can see how that would displease you,” I replied, sarcastically.

Franz snorted, clearly unimpressed. “I did not kill your son, John. We also both know he has transcended death or is someone that can be brought back. I’d happily teach you how to bring back the dead from essential salts if I had an extra thirty years to do so. No, he is the goose that lays the golden egg.”

“The what in the how?” I asked.

“Never mind,” Franz sighed. “What I mean to say is that we’re in this together. We need to find out who killed your son. If you do, I will call off my dogs. The Knights of Arkham will no longer hunt you, and you can go back to helping cats and the trash of the city. We don’t have to be friends, but we don’t have to be enemies.”

“Your offer is wonderfully tempting,” I said. “But I have no interest in your support. Nothing you could say would make me think we aren’t going to be enemies.”

Franz stared at me. “I believe that with your son’s help, we can dream back the Earth and its peoples. Except without the Great Old Ones.”

I stared at him. “Goddammit.”

Chapter Twenty

"You want to recreate the world?" I asked, staring at him.

Every instinct in my body and soul told me that this was a bad idea. Franz Jermyn had in the span of a half-dozen minutes established himself as an unrepentant monster of the human kind. Not only were his politics deranged but he had also proven himself a coward, fleeing to the Dreamlands when the rest of the world burned.

However, I'd worked with monsters before and, while I had no doubt that he would betray then murder me even if I did agree to cooperate, the same would be the case with myself. It would perhaps also give me the chance to find the kind of magic necessary to pierce his defenses and kill him permanently.

"I can see you're already working out the angles," Franz said. "Either that or you're having another memory download."

"Memory download?" I asked.

"I'm not unfamiliar with the nature of parallel realities," Franz chuckled. "I recognize that you're another Booth from another timeline. However, I can already see the essence of the late detective joining with you. Your two timelines becoming what, for lack of a better term, in a more enlightened time would have been called quantum entanglement. Sadly, Earth died before the kind of science related to the subject of alternate universes would have become practical to surviving the Rising."

That was probably as coherent an answer as I was ever going to get regarding what was happening to me. "Do you know who is responsible for this?"

"No," Franz replied. "Though if I knew how to navigate parallel universes from the Dreamlands, I wouldn't need your son's help. Yes, your son dreamed this city into its present existence. He is only limited by the amount of power he is able to channel, and my associates can increase that exponentially."

"And you want to restore the world to its 22nd century state?" I asked, referring to the Pre-Rising Era.

"Yes," Franz replied. "Though I can understand why you would have no necessary attachment to that world. Nothing prevents us from restoring your demon and horror ravaged world as well. The potential your son represents

is the power of creation as the Hebrew God was ascribed. Though it might take more or less than six days."

The sheer audacity of his plan, the motherfucking hubris was staggering. "As powerful as my son is, I sincerely doubt he can create an entire universe."

"He doesn't have to," Franz replied. "There are dead, vacant universes with plenty of stars but no real life of note."

"I thought you just said that you cannot navigate parallel worlds," I replied.

"This was your son's plan," Franz said. "The City was a stopgap measure. I do not understand the specifics, but it is a microcosm of what he can eventually accomplish."

"I don't believe you," I replied, shaken by what he revealed.

Was this what my son had been working toward since I, not to mince words, abandoned him and his sister? Like Doctor Ward, had he become so obsessed with humanity's imminent extinction that he'd devoted himself fully to the dark arts to save it? If so, he'd succeeded and created an ark for the survivors of mankind in the City. However, that didn't fit with the decadent, depraved movie producer I could just barely picture in my doppelganger's mind. I was missing a piece of the puzzle and it was, unfortunately, only through Franz Jermyn that I was likely to find out the truth.

"Believe what you want," Franz said, dismissing my confusion. "It is, nevertheless, the truth. Unfortunately, we are presently prevented from proceeding as we have no way of contacting your son's true self."

"The Dreaming King," I said, admitting the truth.

Franz nodded. "Yes, for that, we required your son's avatar to speak with it. An avatar that is now over there and dead. He was able to commune with the Dreaming King and beseech him for miracles."

"Then I guess you're screwed," I said, taking more satisfaction in events than I probably should have. But not without cause. I had been followed by the Dreaming King's presence since my arrival in the City. I had no doubt that my son—assuming I was correct that their identities were one in the same—had been spying on me like Sauron through his Palantir.

Knowing this, I was quite certain that Franz Jermyn wasn't aware of this and I shouldn't clarify the issue for him. The White Gorilla was my enemy and probably the enemy of humanity's remaining survivors if you'll forgive

a bit of dramatic flourish. Certainly, I didn't want to help the man acquire his own planet to rule even if I was intrigued by the possibility of restoring my dead world.

"Not quite," Franz said. "There is one prospect left."

"Which is?" I asked, realizing we were only now getting to the matter's crux. If there was any doubt Franz was from the Pre-Rising Era, it was dispelled now since all Wastelanders born after the Great Old Ones' return had learned the value of brevity.

"The Silver Key," Franz said. He spoke the word as a specific object, not a description.

He didn't need to explain. "Yes, a dream focus."

Doctor Ward had told me about the silver keys that were common enough gifts to his psychic followers. Martha and Gabriel had both been given one on their fourteenth birthday. Doctor Ward had presented me one as well, but I'd turned out not to need one, even if I was a weak dreamwalker.

I didn't understand the process but basically one used them like meditation tools. A dreamer or dreamwalker took the object and focused on it to be able to maintain their sense of self during sleep. With the right amount of training, you could not only control your dream but move out of it to explore the Dreamlands at will. At least, that had been how it had been before we were all physically in that psychic dimension.

I did not know why the keys had to be made from silver or why they were to take the form of keys, but symbology had never been my strong suit. They were keys, they were silver, and that was just the way it was.

"No," Franz corrected. "Not *a* silver key. *The* Silver Key. Randolph Carter's silver key."

"Oh, him again," I said.

Franz snorted in agreement. Apparently, I was not the only person who seemed to resent this wizard from the 1920s and 30s.

"Yes. Your son worshiped his memory and studied him as a disciple does his prophet. Somehow, against all odds, he managed to find the original silver key that was infused with Randolph Carter's essence. It can open doors in the mind that have been locked away. Even a weak dreamer like myself can pierce the higher dimensions and parallel realities linked to the Dreamlands with it."

“And you want me to find it so you can use it to speak with my son—AKA the Dreaming King—directly,” I asked.

“Yes,” Franz replied.

“I feel that was an incredibly long-winded way of saying that,” I said, dryly.

“How very droll, Mister Booth,” Franz replied. “Whoever killed your son’s avatar is the most likely subject to have the key, but I cannot rule out that he has simply hidden it here in the studio in a place my Knights are unable to find. Bring the Silver Key to me and I will not only make things right between us, but I will shower you with riches. Once I have my own world, perhaps you’d prefer to have the City as your own personal fiefdom.”

“I have no aspirations to kingship,” I replied.

“And yet like the long-dead Cimmerian who became king by his own hand, your career is marked with large amounts of murder and whoring,” Franz said. “Don’t pretend to be the angel. I knew your alternate and while he was your son’s enforcer, he was neck deep in aspiring actresses and cultist quim.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I suppose we have an accord then.”

“I suppose we do. Azathoth’s blessings upon you,” Franz said, dryly. He conjured a white Panama hat and put it on his head before walking off.

Blackman was, amusingly, standing right behind him. He’d probably been there the entire time. “What a wholly unpleasant fellow.”

“Yes,” I replied.

“I assume you know he has no intention of paying you and will, undoubtedly, attempt to kill you again,” Blackman said.

“Yes,” I replied.

“And you will undoubtedly be looking for a way to kill him first,” Blackman said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good,” Blackman said. “Just checking.”

“Is everything I’m hearing about Gabriel really true? What’s your feeling?” I asked the cat, wondering if I should have just left well enough alone.

“Curiosity killed the human,” Blackman responded. “Like most wizards, Gabriel was eager for power and knowledge. Impatient for both and willing to cut corners. The rites of Hastur are not for the faint of heart and most

degenerate to gibbering madmen or monstrous sadists long before they learn the secret name of the Unspeakable One to summon his avatar. It might have been better had he not, but Gabriel eventually learned the secrets of sorcery from the Yellow King himself at the foot of his throne. Your son's name joined the ones of the devils and goblins on the Plateau of Leng, in the kingdom of Hali, on the world of Carcosa where evils of all sentient species in the ten billion galaxies are exalted."

"Is there anything left of him then?" I asked, shuddering at the implications of his words. "The boy I knew?"

"You are his lodestone to his humanity," Blackman said. "I say that as his familiar. Much of his remaining morality, alien and twisted as it may have become to a human, relies on his boyish faith that you knew what was right."

"God help him," I replied, knowing I was a murderer of the innocent and worse. The revelation that Blackman was Gabriel was a surprise but not as much as I expected. The cat knew far too much, and I suspected far more than he was telling.

"Unfortunately, they did," Blackman said.

There was a moment of silence.

"Do you know where his office is?" I asked.

"Really, that's your next question?" Blackman asked.

"When the crushing weight of the universe threatens to drive you mad, the best thing to do is make your focus small," I replied.

Blackman blinked. "A surprisingly enlightened point of view. I'd say it might explain why you haven't been driven mad by the myriad horrors you've encountered but I fully believe you are quite mad by most standards."

"We're all mad here," I quoted *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Well, you *are* talking to a magic cat," Blackman conceded.

"One who talks in riddles," I replied.

"Fair point," Blackman said, lifting a paw in the air. "Gabriel's office is on the second floor of that building over there. It's next to your doppelganger's other office. I doubt anyone will find anything there but porn and guns, though."

"Delightful," I said. "Detective Booth seems like a wonderful fellow."

"You have no vices but sex, magic, and murder," Blackman said. "Really, that's an improvement over half of the City's inhabitants."

“At least I don’t smoke,” I muttered.

“Are you going to get the others?” Blackman said, looking over. “Jackie and Jessica are being held hostage by the cops. The Baroness and her, ahem, friend are with them.”

I considered asking more about the Baroness but held my tongue. “No, keeping them distracted is a good idea. As long as Jermyn thinks he has the upper hand, I’ll be able to move more freely.”

“Ruthless,” Blackman said. “I like it.”

Whatever the case, I headed alongside Blackman to a two-story building near the various studios. It was a surprisingly innocuous looking red brick building which was presently closed. The blinds were drawn on every window. There was a wooden staircase leading up the side to the second floor. Painted in one of the windows was YELLOW KINGS STUDIOS, ADMIN. It had a little crown logo underneath, which I supposed was better than the Yellow Sign over the gate.

Heading up the staircase to my son’s office on the second floor, I noted it was locked. I smashed the window reached in to unlock it from the inside.

“Subtle,” Blackman said.

“It’s not like I have a key,” I replied. Then I remembered the keys Detective Booth had been buried with and suspected I, in fact, had.

“Never mind.”

The cat somehow rolled his eyes.

“To think I buried you with your wallet for this,” Blackman said.

“What?” I asked, opening the door.

The cat sped by me without answering.

The interior was a long hall leading to two separate office doors with windows. The first was marked with JOHN HENRY BOOTH, SECURITY CHIEF on the window, while the other said GABRIEL BOOTH, DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, CHAIRMAN, OWNER, DEMIGOD.

“Well, his ego certainly grew since his teenage years,” I muttered, reaching for my keys and pulling them out before seeking one that had a little crown on the end.

“He makes movies,” Blackman said. “That invariably turns you into a narcissistic psychopath. Well, if he wasn’t already. Which he was.”

“Please don’t say that,” I muttered, testing the key, and finding it worked. “Even if it’s true.”

“Look at the bright side, he was smart enough not to put writer on the door,” Blackman said. “He actually wrote ninety percent of his movies’ dialogue. That was his real talent. All the directing and producing was just to make sure the words were brought to life the way he wanted.”

“He was a dedicated artist,” I said, following Blackman into Gabriel’s office.

The interior of Gabriel’s office was nothing of note. Which is to say it didn’t have a wizard’s laboratory, shackles, or a palace of harem girls. Instead, it had framed movie posters on the wall, a desk for a secretary and a desk for Gabriel himself. It was distressingly normal, and I was surprised at myself for expecting otherwise. The cat had gotten into my head, and I was annoyed I’d let it.

That was an interesting observation in miniature. Cats weren’t human and didn’t think like humans even if they could talk in the Dreamlands. It was a reminder that the creatures from beyond weren’t necessarily evil—or good—but simply different. Unfortunately, that difference could manifest itself in horrifying and confusing ways.

I started to look around the office, not really expecting to find anything of note let alone the silver hey. But, it’s not like I had any other ideas.

“He was a wizard,” Blackman said. “That’s something you need to understand about this place. All of this—this studio, his lurid movies, and the cult of personality—were all part of a larger machination.”

“Which was?” I asked.

“I have not the slightest idea,” Blackman said.

“You’re lying,” I replied.

“You’re right,” Blackman said.

“Why hold back now?” I asked.

The cat smiled a Cheshire grin, which was absolutely a deliberate reference. “It amuses me.”

“You and the Many-Faced God have a lot in common,” I replied.

“You have no idea,” Blackman replied.

I headed to Gabriel’s desk and saw pictures on its surface. There were black and white ones of Jackie, Vincent, and the late Dorothy Kettleman. I was surprised the Knights of Arkham hadn’t already gone through here, but it occurred to me I was probably their first line of investigation rather than their last. That was when I narrowed my eyes and noticed that there were

three drawers. Except, there were two. Except, if I narrowed my eyes, there were three.

Keeping my eyes narrowed, I reached for the third desk and opened it up. Much to my surprise, there was a brown leather-bound book with yellow pages inside. Not a silver key, but it looked like it dated back to the Pre-Rising days and had endured every day since then. It had slime stains on the edge and a kind of weird thin black moss growing out of the leather. There was a bookmark made of gold on it, once more bearing that awful sign.

I recognized the book as *The Prophecies of the Rat God*. It was a book belonging to the cult of Hastur and contained the secrets of the Great Old One Zum-Trivalis, the titular Rat God. I'd recovered it long ago and seeing it in my son's possession left me with the horrifying thought that I'd set my son down this road. The book was not as powerful or informative as the *Necronomicon* or *Book of Eibon*. But it spoke of the end of everything at the hands of the Old Ones and that for humanity to survive, it would have to *change*.

I reached down and touched its cover.

And I once more disappeared into my memories.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Color was chasing me.

When I related the story later in life, there had always been a certain level of dramatic flourish to it. Something like an old film or a campfire tale of driving frantically through the streets of Blacklung before leading the eldritch abomination down to the depths of the mines. Words tend to convey the idea it was heroic and glorious. Certainly, it had all the hallmarks of a chase scene and a kind of outrageous fortune.

The truth lacked all of that.

I was terrified and wheezing out the incantations as I drove, struggling to keep my vehicle from crashing while a glowing monstrous energy poured out like a tidal wave's crash behind me. The almost leisurely pace of the whole thing made it even worse. It followed with no real hurry and destroyed life after life before coming to the Blacklung mines.

You'd think it was the fact I was going to die that would have troubled me. No, that was not the issue. I was actually fairly content with that, and it was well-deserved. I'd become a New Arkham Ranger to help people but my involvement in this massacre negated any good I'd ever done and only exposed the dark nightmarish underbelly to my culture.

Death would be a release.

Nevertheless, I somehow made it to the mine built into the side of the mountain and saw it had been abandoned. The workers had been cleared out earlier for what we'd told them was an experiment and inside was the nuclear weapon. I had to ditch the vehicle but grabbed the burning incense pouch before rushing into the mine.

Off in the distance—a light I refused to look like directly—the Color continued its slow, graceful advance toward me. It had expanded from what its original appearance to something that could only be described as a kilometer-long natural disaster. Blacklung had been its final feast and I could see a host of hundreds of smaller clouds breaking off which were joining the approach toward the mine.

If I looked directly at the incandescent swirling lights, considered the implications, I would have broken down sobbing on the ground for the doom that was going to destroy all of humanity. The Unimaginable Horror's spawn was a set of hungry gods that would poison the Earth, what little

remained of it, then leave it a barren blasted heath. I did not think Doctor Ward's plan would succeed, not really, but had chosen this as an elaborate form of suicide.

Carrying the burning incense in both my arms despite it burning my chest and face with its toxic smoke, I sprinted into the mine's heart and continued running long after I should have become exhausted. Fear, terror, and a variety of other synonyms for my adrenaline-fueled deranged flight kept me going to the sarcophagus-like machine Ward had set up an acre inside. My murmurings of the spell became a gibberish mispronunciation of the words. Yet, the magic seemed to still drain away my life, and I knew its call to the Color was still going out.

If I had been a courageous soldier, I would have lay down beside the nuclear weapon and activated it the moment I heard the abandoned mining equipment behind me being cast aside by the Color's all-too-physical presence. There was a dead man's switch present and if I couldn't count on Gamma Squadron to activate the bomb, I could do it myself. Certainly, I wish they had activated it the moment I entered.

But there was a secret I have long carried that I only admitted to myself sometimes: I wanted to live. I wanted to live far more than I ever would have thought. Like Gilgamesh, I did not think of that when fighting and killing with no thought to my life, but the prospect of death loomed over my every action. It had kept me from killing myself when I was becoming a monster and it kept me alive long after I should have lay down and died.

So, when I saw an open cage elevator by the nuclear weapon, attached to its own private generator, I sought a coward's retreat. The elevator would lead down to the abyss of the mine and gave the illusion of salvation.

I turned the generator on with a tug of its motor then desperately pressed down for the lift to carry me into the depths of the mine. The air became ionized as the elevator began its descent and I heard a terrifying SOUND. A sound that whispered like a million cicadas and the other insects that had inspired Abdul al-Hazred to write his deranged magnum opus.

A frightful thought occurred to me as I moved down one floor—two, three, four—that Gamma Squad might not detonate the nuclear weapon at all. That, despite all this, none of it would mean anything in the end and the Color would pour down the shaft above my head to devour me before moving on. The light above the elevator's cage at the top turned a

Cherenkov blue in one of the few recognizable colors of the spectrum but notably only one that was found around underwater nuclear plants.

That was when the nuclear bomb went off, severing the chords of the elevator and sending me spiraling to the bottom of the caverns below.

Except Doctor Ward had lied. It was not a nuclear weapon.

Nuclear weapons don't scream.

I should have died—maybe I did—but instead, death did not hold me. It seemed almost comical after all of what I'd done to lure the Color into the trap. It seemed Thanatos was not able to claim me. Instead, I dreamed of terrifying monsters on an alien world where time did not exist and everyone faded in and out of existence. They worshiped Yog-Sothoth and shapeshifted into other species before breeding with them, eventually turning them into a branch of their race.

The memories of this strange, alien, and dead race did not last. I woke up with a piercing headache, a piecing pain my legs, a piercing pain in my back, and a piercing pain in my everywhere if I was honest.

"Howdy," a voice spoke. It was surprisingly soothing and full of life, which most people in the world didn't have anymore.

I looked up and saw a canine-faced man with fur across his body, and wearing the loudest shirt I'd ever seen, emblazoned with floral print. He also had on a pair of ratty and torn blue jeans.

A ghoul.

The two of us were in a lightless cavern that, somehow, I could still see in due to a glowing hand that was hovering in the air above us. It was my first exposure to the Hand of Glory spell and something that I would soon learn. I was lying on an old mattress, springs sticking in my back, and there was a noxious brown goo covering various injuries I'd suffered. Strangely, it seemed the pain was subsiding where the substance touched.

"Hello," I responded. The New Arkham Rangers had a duty to kill creatures like this one but I wasn't about to pick a fight. I was also incapable of being scared by a ghoul since my encounter with the Color had burned out my capacity to fear for the time being.

"Richard Upton Jameson," the ghoul introduced itself. "So, are you one of those Nazis from New Arkham? Wait, you're Black, so no."

"John Henry Booth," I replied.

"Ouch," Richard said.

"What?" I asked.

“You’re Black and a Booth,” Richard said. “Must be awkward.”

“Why?” I asked.

Richard paused. “Right. I keep forgetting most people don’t remember the Pre-Rising world.”

“I know the reason, it’s just not relevant after the apocalypse,” I muttered, hoping to shut down the conversation. Ghouls were an ever-useful resource on lost knowledge, history, and culture from the Old World. However, the price for dealing with them was often measured in bloody corpses or dark liaisons that were better not spoken of. Ghouls were the source of the changeling myth and often brought human children down to learn their ways as well as invigorate their bloodlines. Bluntly, most humans in New Arkham just considered them another form of monster. Doctor Ward had taught me a slightly more nuanced perspective that few of my fellow soldiers shared.

“If you say so, chief,” Richard replied.

“I take it I owe you my life?” I asked.

“Not quite,” Richard said. “You were found either dead or close to death at the bottom of a mine shaft by the Mi-Go.”

“The Mi-Go,” I said.

“Aliens,” Richard said. “Big flying fungus bugs. They’re obsessed with the kind of weird mineral that can only be found on life-bearing worlds like this one. They had a deal with the late people of Blacklung to provide as much of it as they could in exchange for more mundane minerals.”

I was familiar with the Mi-Go only as a legend. Even in the Wasteland, there were rumors and stories that were more myth than substance. Supposedly, they were creatures that traveled around in UFOs and performed grizzly experiments. I’d always dismissed them, not because I didn’t believe in aliens, but I questioned why anyone would take an interest in humanity.

The idea they raised me from the dead, potentially, was less upsetting than it perhaps might have been. I had fully expected to die and had complicated feelings toward religion, so the fact I was alive now was the part I chose to focus on. Specifically, I was alive in what was a deep, dark tunnel with a friendly but inhuman monster.

I was more unsettled by the fact that I’d survived or been revived by people outside of my power. Few Wastelanders were anything resembling accommodating and the monsters we fought were aloof or hostile, to put it

mildly. It felt like I was possessed of a fantastically unlikely bit of luck and I couldn't help but wonder if Doctor Ward had worked magic to move events in my favor. If so, I had to question what sort of price that it would cost me or others. I didn't want to pay for my life in the blood of innocents and after today's events, I had a massive amount of innocent blood on my hands—not that they had been clean beforehand.

"Weird mineral?" I asked.

"Coal," Richard said. "One man's alien treasure is another man's heating rock. Either way, they revived you and noticed you were something unique."

"Unique?" I asked.

"Yes," Richard said. "Never heard that description before. Are you unique?"

"Not in the slightest," I replied.

"Shame," Richard said. "They almost took your brain out before they decided they were better wrapping up all of their business down here and threw you out like a piece of rubbish. I proceeded to bring you out here and am applying some ghoul medicine. You should be right as rain if you survive, which, honestly is questionable. Ghoul medicine has a hell of a kick to it. However, I figured you didn't want to be a cripple down here and it was the only option. Mi-Go surgeries aren't exactly careful. They always figure they can stick your brain in a big Dalek body or cyborg chassis. Which is what I suppose their Dalek bodies are. You know what a Dalek is?"

"No." I wasn't dead, nor did I appear to be dying. "Thank you for your attention but that leads to my next question: why?"

"Can't a stranger help out from the goodness of his heart?" Richard asked.

"No," I replied.

"Fair enough," Richard said. "Maybe I was expecting you to die again and I could get a tasty snack. I could still bash you over the head and make that happen."

"Then you wouldn't have treated me," I replied. "Also, ghouls are scavengers not predators."

"Not all of us," Richard said. "Some of us are ranchers. You have not seen something more likely to chill your blood more than the descendants of

thousands of years of inbreeding designed to strip the sentience of humans. They're kept in pens, bred, and slaughtered for the good of the colonies."

I stared at him. "Is it horrifying?"

"Excuse me?" Richard asked, apparently genuinely surprised by my reaction.

Mind you, so was I. I had seen the kind of horrific treatment the smaller meat animals received at the hands of the New Arkham factories. It didn't particularly surprise me that some portion of the ghoul race would view us the same way. Humans treated fellow humans with similar levels of inhumanity, particularly slavers, and Doctor Ward had always claimed ghouls were no worse than mankind rather than saying they were our moral superiors.

"I ask because you're a ghoul," I replied. "Wouldn't it be normal to you?"

"Not if your mother was human," Richard said. "I've always been closer to my human side than my ghoul. I even live on the surface despite the hatred directed my way. It turns out the people of Ghoul Pass are willing to tolerate my kind in exchange for what I can do."

"Which is?" I asked, expecting some dark arcane secret or negotiated deal with the darkness below.

"I'm a mechanic," Richard replied.

I blinked. "I see."

"What's your story?" Richard asked.

"I'm a monster hunter," I replied.

"How's that gone for you?" Richard asked.

"Not well," I replied, snippily. "I managed to bury at least one up above me, though. Hopefully, it won't trouble any further generations of humans."

"If you mean the living rainbow upstairs, maybe," Richard said, showing remarkable knowledge. "But I'm not sure you can kill what isn't technically alive in the first place. It's like saying you killed a cumulous cloud. Its trapped—along with its offspring—inside of some sort of creature made of geometry, though."

I opened my mouth.

"I'm sorry, what?" I understood all those words but not when said together. "Made of geometry?"

"Would you believe me if I said it's better to just accept and move on from that?" Richard asked.

“Very much so,” I replied. “How do you know its trapped?”

“It’s screaming,” Richard said, dryly. “You could hear it if you had ears like mine. It’s another reason the Mi-Go are leaving. They call the Rainbows the Planet-Eaters. Probably because they eat planets.”

“I got that,” I replied. I refused to call the Color and its offspring Rainbows. Not that my name for them was much better. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Are you familiar with the ‘phrase talk is cheap’?” Richard asked.

“I’ve heard variants,” I replied. “Certainly, I’ve heard a lot of individuals that I should have been paid to listen to. Particularly among the Council of Leaders.”

“Glad to see politician jokes survived the world’s end,” Richard said, snorting. “Whoever said that phrase has never been truly lonely. The price of a good conversation can be measured in gold or food, depending on what you value most. I’m willing to lead you out of these caves, John, a journey of eleven days and nights even if you know which way you’re going. But the price is talking.”

“Alright,” I said. “Just so we’re clear, this is leading me out of these caves to the surface, right?”

“Oh, you don’t want to be led down to the great ghoul city of Shak’ta’hadron where you will marry a ghoul woman, learn to walk on all fours, and dine on the flesh of mortals until you become as we are?” Richard asked.

“No,” I said, dryly. Richard was clearly a ghoul of rare wit. I wasn’t in a particularly witty mood, though. I’d survived and would have to cope with my part in the nightmare that was Blacklung’s destruction. “Also, cannibalism doesn’t work that way.”

“If you don’t do the proper spells, no!” Richard said, throwing his hands in the air. “You gotta make offerings to Tsathoggua and rub the bone dust onto the fur. Do some dancing. Smoke some weed.”

“Uh huh,” I said, staring at him.

“I can see I’m getting my money’s worth from you as a traveling companion,” Richard said.

“Let the buyer beware,” I said, struggling to get up and just barely managing. My injuries were almost healed, and I had no idea how. Perhaps Richard’s ghoul medicine was stronger than it appeared.

“Yeah, well, let’s get going on our trip through the Underdark,” Richard said.

“Underdark?” I asked.

“Not a big Dungeons and Dragons *fan, I see,” Richard said.*

“We have a dungeon back at New Arkham but no dragons,” I replied. “Thankfully.”

Our journey through the kilometers long tunnels below the Wasteland proved to be a fascinating one. Richard taught me many things about magic, ghoul culture, the Dreamlands, and the lyrics to the songs of a band called the Rolling Stones. We fought Rat God cultists, Faceless Ones, and Sporemen. Toward the end, we traded with an eyeless witch that ate guilt. That was how we got our copy of The Prophecies of the Rat God. *At one point, we came across a cave containing a gigantic furry toad-thing that Richard claimed was the god of all ghouls. It lazily threw a rock at us, and I swear to you, cursed at us in broken Swahili. Not exactly the sort of behavior one would expect from a god.*

We reached the sun after twelve days.

And I would never view the creatures I called monsters the same way again.

My son had received the Prophecies of the Rat God *from Doctor Ward when I turned it over and he’d seen the future in them. He’d also seen through my eyes due to his talent of psychometry and my possession of the book.*

He knew I’d killed all those innocents in Blacklung.

Been willing to sacrifice myself.

By all the gods, he was imitating me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I found myself collapsed on the ground, vomiting up the contents of my stomach. Given that was mostly rat hot dogs and some leftover rice from Jessica's fridge, it formed a rather nasty puddle in front of my face.

"Fuck," I muttered, trying to steady myself on the polished black marble floor. It was so shiny I could have seen my face in it if not for the fact that was obscured by the vomit in front of me. My head was pounding, and I had the *Prophecies of the Rat God* in my right hand.

Was this all really my fault?

I understood the message Gabriel was trying to send me now. To save humanity, one must be willing to sacrifice everything: morality, self, and others. It was the absolute worst lesson I could have taught him and a pointless one as well. I had seen the depths mankind could sink to in the name of survival, and the results were possibly still human but no human that was worthy of life.

I imagined humans kept as cattle, grown in pens and forcibly bred to feed the gullets of ghouls. I imagined humans made like the Great Old Ones, wild and free with nothing resembling human morality. The Knights of Arkham were growing only pale-skinned humans of perfect pedigrees, existing under the tyrannical military rule of people like the Council of Leaders, slowly rotting from within as all imperfections were killed at birth.

Yet, I understood his logic.

In the decades since I first discovered my horrifying inhuman parentage, a part of me had made peace with it and that part almost regretted—no, did regret—the giddy glee I'd reacted to my totally human state I'd achieved in the City. A world of demihumans or Kastro'vaal wasn't so bad. I loved Jackie as a ghoul or human, demented as my earlier self would have found it. Was there a balance to be struck or was angst—in the Aristotelian sense of wanting two contradictory things—simply the one truly human thing?

Life as a monster.

Death as a man.

Repeatedly, I'd refused to make that choice. I wanted to live as a man and whenever I had a chance at honorable death, I somehow either escaped it or was denied it. Yet, the prospect of life as a monster was something I'd suppressed as well. The alien pleasures and unnatural powers I could have

—both of which tempted me despite my insistence otherwise—were things I forced away lest they undermine my fragile sense of self.

My son had tried to walk the delicate road of man and beast, only to find himself far into the woods of something worse than both. I could only guess, but at some point he'd discovered his Kastro'vaal nature, and it had accelerated his quest for more power.

What had my son sacrificed to become the Dreaming King?

What would I find here, following the bread crumb trail he'd left? Was all this a plan of his design to guide me here? From Mister Death to the Tree of Azathoth to Jessica onward?

"My gods," Blackman's voice spoke behind me. "Will you just shut up? Please!"

I turned back my head, still not having taken in my surroundings, to see the cat staring at me.

"What?" I asked.

"I followed you through the portal," Blackman said, referring to no portal I'd seen. "Then I made the mistake of looking into your thoughts. Dear Azathoth, do you love to hear yourself talk."

"I was thinking not talking," I replied.

"Same difference," Blackman said, blinking its large yellow eyes. "A word from the wise—which I am—philosophizing and whining are two different things."

I narrowed my eyes. "Next time knock before you enter my head."

"I couldn't fit," the cat replied, licking its paw. "It's too full of drivel."

"Where am I?" I asked, feeling still nauseous. I didn't like being battered around time, space, and memory but it seemed like I was going to keep having to endure such things for the immediate future. That is, unless my son had made his point.

I hadn't thought of Blacklung in a long time, and it occurred to me how abnormal that was. I'd seen men reduced to quivering masses by the guilt from killing even a single other human being. Yet, here I had been involved in a massive atrocity and it was simply another part of my life. I had done other things I shouldn't have been proud of as a Ranger on behalf of the Council of Leaders, but it was only those that directly affected my family or friends that I cared about.

Even then, I was able to hold those parts of my mind separate from the rest. Did that make me a monster or simply someone who had been trained

as a killer? The problem with defining humanity as something inherently good was that we were a violent, ignorant species. Very few humans were truly humane when push came to shove. And I'd always been a hybrid human-Kastro'vaal it seemed, so was my own experience of being a man even comparable to that of others?

"You're doing it again," Blackman said. "As for what's around you, maybe you should take a look yourself."

I pushed myself up and finally took in my surroundings. I was no longer inside Gabriel's office, that much was obvious, but where I currently was couldn't be initially determined. The best way I could describe it was I was now in an enormous temple with strange angles, about an acre in size, with large ionic pillars keeping its stone ceiling aloft. The pillars were decorated with stylized depictions of Death chasing down hordes of frightened slaves.

The chamber was illuminated by burning braziers that released a strange, incense-like smell that was vaguely unclean. The walls were similarly decorated as the pillars, depicting a beautiful but terrible mural of a yellow robed figure rising from the death of a world before spreading out its tendrils across space.

The most noticeable thing in the temple, though, was a twelve-foot-tall grotesque, obese statue of an alien with bat-like ears. It had large spider-like legs sticking out of its base with a scorpion-esque tail coming out of the back. The creature's all-too-human face had a malformed snout with an expression of fury as well as malevolence.

Zum-Trivalis, the Rat God.

The Lord of Vermin.

The Herald of Hastur.

"We're in a Temple of Hastur," I said, taking in my surroundings.

"Nothing escapes you, does it?" Blackman said. "Specifically, we're in the orgy chamber of Apophis Zul from *Andrew Doran and the King in Yellow*."

I stared at him.

"What?"

"It's a movie set," Blackman said, running his claws against the side of the ionic pillars and doing visible damage to them. They were nothing more than props made of papier-mâché and wood.

"The orgy chamber," I said, narrowing my eyes.

“Is there anything about your son that indicates he is a classy filmmaker?” Blackman asked.

“It’s best not to speak ill of the dead,” I replied, deciding to look around.

“You and I both know he’s not,” Blackman said. “After a certain point, death becomes more of a suggestion rather than a reality. You should know.”

“After a certain point in what?” I asked, getting annoyed with how much the cat clearly knew but wasn’t sharing.

“Not yet,” Blackman said.

I tucked away the *Prophecies of the Rat God* in my pocket before looking around the set and finding the backstage. There I saw a bookshelf of all things. It was full of hundreds of pulp magazines dating back from the Pre-Rising period.

I pulled a copy off of the shelves and stared at it. It was a post-apocalypse story with a shadow-encrusted cowboy in front of a skull. I flipped through it and found a tale of John Henry Booth facing down the Color. There was also a story of the Color first arriving on Earth and sleeping for centuries under a blasted heath. I flipped back to the table of contents and noted the latter short story was by Randolph Carter. It was a reprint. I didn’t recognize the name of the author of the Booth story.

“Interesting,” I said, closing the book and putting it back on the shelf.

The shelf was filled with a collection of action, horror, fantasy, and science fiction with lurid prose crossed with nightmarish monsters. Many of them were sequels of pastiches of Carter’s writing, who seemed to have created a fandom in the Pre-Rising world. One of the books, however, was a black leather-bound book written by something called the Randolph Carter Historical Society: *I am Arkham*. It had a thick bookmark of some kind wedged in-between its pages.

I picked up the book and was surprised by its weight. It was as if the pages were made of lead and contained a great deal of force to them. The dust jacket indicated it was a biography of the non-magical, mundane life of Randolph Carter until his mysterious disappearance. I didn’t particularly care to learn more about the life of the man, so I turned to the location of the bookmark and discovered, much to my surprise, a silver key in the middle of the text. *The* Silver Key? I believed so. Surely, it couldn’t be that easy.

I almost reached for the key but paused when I noticed the handwritten notes in the margins. It was the Lord's Prayer and a rebuttal of Randolph Carter's materialist atheist views. I was barely religious and my son, even as a boy, was even less so. Certainly, he had taken up his interest in the occult for transactional reasons, but however much he'd changed as an adult, I highly doubted he'd developed an interest in Christianity.

Perhaps I had done a poor job of training him to be straight forward or maybe I'd done just the right amount of such because I took it to be a warning. A theatrical Agatha Christie-style message but one that was, nevertheless, clear to me: the key was booby-trapped.

Cursed even.

I could sense no magic radiating from the key itself, but that would be the case to keep the object protected from discovery at the hands of wizards like the White Gorilla or the late Alan Ward. I could not pierce it with my Sight, but I imagined the most horrific, foul, and arcane sorceries wrapped in a death curse smothered under a spell rendering then invisible arcane senses. I could not confirm this nor had any secret insight from Detective Booth's memories.

No, it was simply instinct and the idea that if I were to leave a trap for my enemies then I would have set the snare in exactly the same way. Heedless of the danger to any poor man, woman, or other who wanted to read about Randolph Carter's failed marriage to a Semitic woman some years his senior or other random factoids within.

Yet, the clue also must contain some way to safely handle it. It wasn't simply the Lord's Prayer: that would be too simple. It had to be something personal between us. Except that as much as I clung to the belief of some higher power out there who wasn't a complete bastard, I wasn't exactly the God botherer type myself. Then I remembered it, a quote my mother had on a pillow in our home that hadn't been confiscated by the Council of Leaders.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil," I said, reaching down and picking up the key. The perfect quote for a Ranger, at least it would be if not for the fact that I had long since become one of those evils.

A dead god had risen to destroy the world and elevate his followers, but that had been Cthulhu. A god had seen all, known all, and been one with us during trying times as well as glorious ones, but that was Yog-Sothoth. A

god had descended from the heavens to live among us and preach his version of the Good News, but that had been Nyarlathotep—both Messiah and Great Beast in one. The one who had breathed life into the universe? Azathoth. Gaia, Demeter, Isis, and Inanna were all faces of Shub-Niggurath.

In the end, I did not die when I touched the key, but I could not help but think this was another warning from my son. He had decided to become a god to protect the wretched few people leaving our dead world—or at least a sort of Moses—and the transformation had been a terrible one.

Or maybe my son had just put the damn key in a book, there was no curse, and he'd developed an interest in Jesus alongside Hastur.

What the hell did I know?

Wrapping my hand around the Silver Key, I placed it in my pocket before I pondered what my next move was. I didn't get much of a chance to think about the issue before there was an enormous crashing sound from the front of the "temple." It was a sound of grinding, gnashing, and cracking followed by the chittering of rats.

"That can't be good," I muttered, tossing the book on the ground and drawing Mercury's Gift.

"John, you may want to come out here!" Blackman said, his voice showing the slightest bit of tension for the first time in our association.

I did and immediately regretted doing so.

The sight that greeted me was something straight of a Hyborian epic. The statue of Zum-Trivalis had risen off from its dais and was now moving in a jerking, unnatural fashion toward me. The statue was not made of paper mâché or stone but was alive, a creature of disgusting, hardened matter that had no Earthly equivalent. Its eyes were now burning coals of swirling luminescent chaos.

That was not the most horrific part, though. As if a living monolith where a statue of a Great Old One coming to life wasn't terrifying enough, the disgusting idol was belching forth horrific torrents of deformed human-faced rats. All of them letting forth nightmarish screams that were akin to that of a man or woman's rather than a beast's.

Perhaps foolishly, I aimed Mercury's Gift at the horde of oncoming rats that were swarming me rather than the source of them. I had five bullets left after fruitlessly expending one in my attempt to kill the White Gorilla. Well, four now as the floor exploded in an ever-expanding lake of fire that I had to pull away from as the horde of rats on the floor started to burn to death.

They screamed for release and help in human languages I understood while dying horribly.

"*Nagha! Nagha! Hastur ma'al Kitan!*" The Rat God shouted in the air with a voice that had at three throats.

The blasphemous prayer it spoke to the ceiling made me sick and caused me to choke and heave before I started to feel something within my mouth. I vomited again on the ground, hurling up a living thing that wiggled on the ground and looked like an alien fetus. The slimy five-inch thing was a mix of human, tardigrade, and some alien caterpillar-esque mixture in its stillborn form. I thought it was a natal Kastro'vaal, that shapeshifting alien race that had bred throughout the stars with hundreds of other species.

I couldn't focus on that sanity blasting sight or what it might mean, though, because horrific pustules started appearing up and down my arm, then spreading down across my chest to my legs. The nightmarish sores oozed and leaked before popping, sending me to the ground while the living statue waded through the flames, stopping just next to my face. I was melting from the inside and out in a feverish occult death brought about by this incarnation of foulness from beyond the realms of terror.

Alien magic was being worked against me and nothing I knew or could perform would do a damned thing to stop it. I lifted my wobbling hand up, aiming the gun on its side and fired three more rounds before failing to fire the last bullet in the chamber. The fire bullets struck against the side of the monster, causing great flames to pour up and down its sides but doing no damage since even mystical fire was nothing to a creature born on a world where the mightiest of flames was an afternoon's sun.

With the barest strength remaining in my limbs, I could only fingerpaint on the ground using one functioning appendage. I drew the Elder Sign on the ground, pouring what little remained of my life force into it, until the strange swirling pattern appeared beneath me. It was a palm leaf, it was a star, it was an eye and more.

The statue of Zum-Trivalis reared up as if I had thrown acid in its face despite ignoring the bonfire burning around it like raindrops. It stomped and gnashed its jaws, making unmentionable ungodly sounds while shaking its head back and forth. None of that helped me as I lay there, dying, and no more capable of reacting than a newborn baby fresh from its womb.

That was when the fetus on the ground beside me, sitting in the flames unharmed, spoke, "*How is your humanity treating you, John? Is it*

everything you dreamed it would be?”

I stared at it with one eye open. “Fuck you.”

If I was going mad, at least I would go mad with pride.

“*Because that’s served you so well. What is the point of spitting in the face of God and Satan if neither one notices?*” the fetus spoke and I recognized its voice as that of R’thugh’cruan, the monster that I was both son and reincarnation of. The creature I’d suppressed then hopefully killed by dreaming myself as a human. But it had been with me all along until this moment.

“W..” I couldn’t even finish the word what.

“*Are you a man or a monster?*” R’thugh’cruan asked and I knew what it was offering. How could I not? We were one in the same.

“Yes,” I said, grabbing the unholy thing in my hand despite the flames burning my sickly quivering hand.

Zum-Trivalis overcame its fear of the Elder Sign and descended on me.

I ate of the darkness in my hand.

And was reborn.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I was one with R’thugh’cruan.

Now I remembered the fullness of his life, though the alien vistas of his home on the Kastro’vaal homeworld were not so different from humanity’s once sufficient perspective was applied. They had been a vicious, decadent, and hedonistic warrior race driven by selfishness and cruelty.

They were also the ancestors of humanity.

R’thugh’cruan had made his evil pact with Nyarlathotep after a Great Old One, the Unimaginable Horror, had retroactively wiped his people from the timeline. They had survived in Yog-Sothoth’s body, outside of time, preserving themselves but R’thugh’cruan had not known the truth. Instead, he begged Nyarlathotep to let him be reborn through magic as a demon summoned by wizards and scientists across untold epochs. What had followed had been a series of terrible resurrections through many worlds and galaxies. It had been his last, vain hope that he could sire a new race that would eventually become replacements for his dead one.

All his incarnations had eventually been destroyed, sometimes at the hands of their own parents as species recognized the cuckoo bird among them trying to infiltrate their world. R’thugh’cruan had wanted the Kastro’vaal to be reborn, so he bred with the locals in his attempt to restore his race to life. But it had been on Earth that he had succeeded. Not with me. Oh no, it was far earlier that such a thing had happened. The Elder Things had summoned R’thugh’cruan with Nyarlathotep’s magic and had proceeded to experiment on the creature. Horrific, nightmarish experiments. Experiments lasting ages as humans reckoned time. It had been from these experiments that the Elder Things had successfully duplicated the complex strands of alien DNA to make the perfect slave race.

Shoggoths.

It had been the shoggoth DNA that they had eventually used to mutate and warp the early primates into the creatures that would become humans. They had used simian DNA to modify their shoggoths and through some bizarre cellular mutation, the result had given the blob-like creatures the will to break the Elder Things’ spells of control.

Perhaps it was some distilled racial memory or reincarnation-born meme that had carried my hatred of the Elder Things forward to when I was reborn for a second time through Alan Ward's experiments on my mother, ones that she'd agreed to and had been decidedly sexual in nature. I didn't want to remember that but, right now, it was the most human of the alien memories that assaulted me.

I was shoggoth.

Human.

Kastro'vaal.

Man.

John.

R'thugh'cruan.

Me.

It was an ascension I could have done without, but it wasn't one I could lie to myself about and say I hadn't chosen life over death. Life was full of possibilities, alien or otherwise, while death was very final. Either way, I felt different, like my entire body was now liquid and only by concentrating could I make it feel right.

Mind you, that was a very different feeling than I'd felt just a few moments ago when I was lying on the ground turning into a puddle of goo rather than just being made into one. Looking around me, feeling like I could conjure eyes across my flesh, I took in my surroundings with just the two of them and a Sight that radiated off every inch of my presently naked but fully healed form.

I was surrounded by gore.

What precisely had happened in the last few minutes was lost to me, much like most of the times I'd given into the inner monster, but this time had resulted in the enormous Zum-Trivalis effigy having been ripped to pieces. The walls were painted with green, purple, black, and unrecognizably colored viscera as well as the remains of half-digested matter. The Rat God had apparently made meals of multiple humans as well as hundreds of lesser animals because they were among the slaughtered organs surrounding me.

The smell was beyond revolting but more, so it was clear that I had destroyed the manifestation in a heinous as well as vicious manner. Parts of the set were still on fire—thankfully dying out versus spreading—and the toxic smell of smoke was a welcome relief from the innards of the creature

that had almost sent me to yet long-awaited grave. I tried stretching my fingers out to claws and they slithered outward, becoming alien chitinous matter that I swiftly withdrew back into my hand.

“Blackman, are you alive or did I kill you?” I asked, really hoping that wasn’t the case.

“I’m alive, no thanks to you,” Blackman said, speaking from the rafters at the top of the now-ruined temple.

I looked up.

“Okay, how the hell did you get up there?”

“Wasn’t easy,” Blackman said, not answering the question. “Just so, we’re clear, that is one of the most disgusting things I’ve ever seen in my life. You also have no idea what sort of things I’ve seen over the millennia.”

“Millennia?” I asked.

“I have more than nine lives,” Blackman said. “Many, many more.”

“Yes, well, it was me or him. It. Me or it,” I said, struggling to find my footing. Everything seemed different now.

“No, I meant you eating the baby,” Blackman said.

“It wasn’t a baby!” I said, shouting up to him. “It was a representation of my alien heritage. I think.”

“I know what it looked like,” Blackman said. “So, you’re a shoggoth now?”

“Something like that,” I said, looking around for something to wear. I wasn’t about to start trying to replicate clothes. That might have been possible, though. I didn’t know the extent of what I could do now.

“Does that mean your children are blobs in human form or they’re human forms that can become blobs?” Blackman asked. “Do you still even care about that sort of thing?”

I found a nearby room full of costumes and, thankfully, it had a yellow suit that was marginally presentable. It even had a canary yellow fedora which I put on. I did feel a bit peculiar putting on a stranger’s—possibly my son’s—underwear but the fact I did struck me as absurd in and of itself. I eventually found both the Silver Key and Mercury’s Gift among the wreckage of the orgy chamber (ugh) as well.

“Why do you even care, Blackman?”

“I have my reasons,” Blackman said, suddenly appearing behind me.

“I feel…human enough,” I said. “I suppose shoggoths are similar enough to humans that when they assume the shape of one, they become

one. Sort of like the Kastro'vaal. I am full of different sorts of patterns in my mind, though. It's nothing I want to test."

I'd killed a shoggoth while I'd still been—mostly—human so I didn't think they were invincible creatures. I was now stronger, tougher, and faster than any human. I could shapeshift to a degree, though my fears of changing self were more a fear that I wouldn't be able to return to my present form, but this wasn't about gaining power.

This had been a desperation move to survive and it was a line that once crossed could not be uncrossed. I'd thought I'd come to terms with being a monster before but it seemed it was a lesson I would have to continue to learn over again every day until it either stuck or my now-alien existence ended.

"Yes, it's a shame you couldn't have accepted being a shoggoth or Kastro'vaal on Earth," Blackman replied. "You'd have been a decent mid-sized creature there. Unfortunately, you're now in the Dreamlands and the City is a droplet of water in the ocean of chaos that is Azathoth's domain."

Just who was this cat? "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is the Xothians—that's a rough approximation of Cthulhu's race's name in the human tongue—are nothing more than an afternoon biscuit to the kind of things that are found out here."

I stared down at the cat. "Oh joy. You're never going to let me enjoy any sense of security or hope, are you?"

Blackman smiled at me. "You killed an avatar of Zum-Trivalis. So, take some pride in that. However, if the world rested on the back of a giant turtle, you'd be best to avoid the creatures that eat turtles around here."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked, staring at him. "Turtles?"

"The gaps in your knowledge are frustrating, John," Blackman sighed. "You are a deep well in many places, for a human, but a shallow pond in others."

"Do I have to worry about a planet-sized turtle?" I asked. "I feel like asking should be silly but it's not the strangest thing I've encountered."

"No, John," Blackman said. "There are no planet-sized turtles."

"Ah," I replied.

"I think," Blackman said, pausing, "Wait, it depends on how you define turtles. One is the enemy of a giant spider that hunts children."

"Stand back!" A human voice spoke nearby, causing me to become momentarily distracted. At this point, I'd been so terrified and beaten that

I’d purged through my ability to become alarmed.

“Now what,” I muttered, responding more lethargically than I probably should have.

It was Vincent Keaton accompanied by what I could only describe as the reanimated corpse of Malcolm Jones, the detective having had his throat slit and shambling along with a pistol raised at me. Vincent Keaton, himself, was carrying a crystal rod in front of him that I recognized to be one of the Great Race of Yith’s super-scientific devices.

I’d witnessed their use at Miskatonic University, the real one, back on my world before the Yithians had carried forth the consciousnesses of their cultists to join them in the far future of some parallel history. Vincent radiated a sense of strange power that caused me to take a step back, confusing me as I had no idea why my instincts were suddenly extremely on alert after having been face-to-face with a demigod.

“Hello, Mr. Keaton,” I said, dryly. “What are you doing here?”

“You broke the spell on Studio Thirteen,” Vincent spoke. “You brought it back to reality after we hid it.”

“You and Gabriel,” I said, taking his meaning.

Vincent aimed the crystal rod at me like it was a magic wand and since I’d seen them disintegrate people like flash paper, I took the threat seriously. I understood Blackman’s warning now. I may have gained a bit more durability and strength due to my transformation fully into a monster but there were an infinite number of things bigger than me still. I’d also shown how regular humans could be threats to Kastro’vaal/shoggoths if they had the right equipment.

“Yes,” Vincent said, staring at him. “My people were wrong, you know. We thought we could just simply pick a new race after humanity’s extermination and start anew, just like we did after the war with the Unimaginable Horror and Flying Polyps.”

“I really don’t care,” I said, perhaps not saying the best thing to a man who was clearly unhinged.

“But the future changed!” Vincent said. “Changed! The time we were meant to visit vanished and we had to move to another world in another reality. So many of our kind were lost when the timeline was overridden. If that can happen, all of our plans were pointless! Your son saw that! He knew we had to seek new avenues of power.”

“Vincent was your son’s lover,” Blackman explained.

“I gathered that,” I replied. “I question the ethics of him being involved with a body-snatching psychic parasite, no matter how learned.”

“Shut up!” Vincent screamed. “My people abandoned me! Left me behind when they made the ascension! Even when they took so many human consciousnesses with them! Gabriel gave me life and purpose! Before it was ruined!”

I realized the source of his agitation. “You were the one who killed him, or at least his avatar.”

Blackman turned his head in a typical cat-like fashion. “That’s a bit of a leap, isn’t it?”

“Yes!” Vincent snapped. “Yes, I did it!”

“Holy shit,” Blackman said, turning his head back. “I guess I owe you a water dish, Booth. You’re a better detective than I thought.”

“Give me the key!” Vincent said, holding his free hand out. “You can’t be allowed to give it to the White Gorilla.”

I had no intention of doing either.

“First tell me why. Also, why Detective Jones is a zombie.”

I had the suspicion that Vincent had been the one to summon the avatar of Zum-Trivalis, or at least activate a preexisting spell to bring its effigy to life. Summoning magic was the most unpredictable kind of sorcery, relying on tearing extradimensional rifts and bringing forth beings into three-dimensional space or creating bodies for which to project their consciousness into this universe. Both almost universally relied on the once-thought discredited science of vitalism, though, to provide the necessary power.

Which was a long way of saying that Vincent had probably slit Malcolm’s throat when the latter wasn’t looking and used the blood to summon the Great Old One—or just Old One? I’m not sure if there was a word for “mid-range alien god.”—I didn’t know how that had led to him shambling about as a reanimated, but I figured if Vincent could bring a statue to life then he probably could raise his victim’s corpse as backup too.

“Technically, Detective Jones is now a revenant not a zombie,” Blackman corrected.

Vincent aimed the crystal rod at Blackman and said a word that was incomprehensible even by my standards. Blackman jumped to the side before a bolt of glowing force struck the area he’d been standing, creating a

foot deep hole in the marble floor. Blackman appeared on the beams above our head in the ceiling, once more moving faster than the eye could see.

“Don’t taunt the murderer, Blackman,” I said, debating what to do since I was out of bullets and not exactly trained in the use of my newly acquired shoggoth powers.

“I am not a murderer,” Vincent gave the most futile defense ever. I don’t think there’s any father in any world who would accept the word of his son’s killer, at least any who still loved their boy. “Everything I have done has been for the purpose of survival or helping your son.”

“Sure,” I said, not wanting to antagonize the crazy person. “So why did you kill him?”

“I… sacrificed everything,” Vincent said. “I taught him everything I knew; I changed my essence so that I became contaminated—”

“Contaminated?” I asked.

“I cannot hold a form long without burning it out,” Vincent muttered. “The touch of the Yellow King is inside me.”

It was clear the Yithian was mad now. Anything I got out of him would be disjointed or misleading. Still, I was finally getting answers. “Why did you turn on him? Why did you try to kill me.”

“I was wrong about what he planned to do,” Vincent muttered. “I did not know how he would change himself. It cannot be allowed to complete its transformation. It must be cut off from the rest of the Dreamlands. It cannot spread and gro—”

A gunshot rang out and Vincent fell forward before he struggled to raise his crystal rod against me, only for a second shot to sound and cause him to collapse. Almost immediately, whatever control Vincent had over the reanimated beside him failed and the mutilated corpse of Malcolm Jones dropped its gun and started to feast upon the actor.

Vincent was still alive and the sounds he made were ghastly. It said something about how jaded and cynical I’d become that my initial thought to seeing a man eaten alive was that it was unusual for a reanimated to engage in cannibalism.

Before I could move to grab either the crystal rod on the ground or the gun dropped by Detective Jones, the White Gorilla walked in with a new companion holding a smoking gun. Much to my disappointment, I saw it was Martha.

“Hello,” Franz said, cheerfully. “I do believe you have something of mine.”

Martha aimed her gun at me. “I’m afraid our relationship has reached an endpoint, John.”

Well, shit.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I searched Martha's eyes for any sign of a secret plan or gambit she was working on. Finding none, I searched instead for an enchantment or mind-control that might have been worked by the White Gorilla like some storybook wizard. No, there was no sign of that, either. Instead, there was simply the steely determination of a New Arkham Loyalty Officer that had committed herself to her present course of action.

There's something of a truism in that people often trust self-interest over altruism. That a person who presents themselves up front as ruthless, conniving, and duplicitous is somehow more honest than someone who claims to be without guile. The cynics among us believe everyone must be a little bit of a hypocrite or a schemer so they see wearing that as a badge of honor to be superior to honest presentation of forthrightness.

Which is to say that I'd severely misjudged Martha and was a fool for doing so. She had betrayed me before by testifying against me at the show trial I'd received in New Arkham following my ill-fated invasion of the Black Cathedral. Martha had betrayed the Council of Leaders to install a puppet government in Kingsport not long before our home had been destroyed by a Cthulhuoid entity. Finally, she had openly admitted to being a part of my assassination with the caveat that Martha had not expected my survival. Right before asking me to kill the White Gorilla for her.

All taken together, it led me to an inexplicable conclusion: Martha Peasley Booth, mother of my children, was a snake. It was an example of Occam's Razor, the simplest explanation being the correct answer. One that I had repeatedly ignored out of a desperate willful blindness akin to humanity's own toward the myriad occult terrors that had existed ubiquitously beside them since the day their ancestors had first crawled out of the primordial ooze.

"I see you have once more reevaluated your loyalties," I said, sighing and raising my hands. I knew the bullets in Martha's gun were quite capable of killing a shoggoth as I could sense them with my new alien senses from twelve feet away. They were made of R'lyehian gold and marked with blood magic that had required the sacrifice of an innocent for each cartridge. It made me suspect that the late Vincent Sage's spirit had likely

been bound to his body so it could not escape as it was devoured by the ravenous reanimated still chowing down on him.

“You are incorrect,” Martha replied. “My loyalties have ever remained with a single individual: myself.”

The White Gorilla watched on, silently amused at this family drama enfolding before him.

“How prosaic,” I said, frowning. “You are not just betraying me here. You are betraying our child.”

Martha scoffed. “It is ever your failure that you cannot look into my mind, John. If you could then you would see I am a more evolved organism than most. The emotional attachments that form the basis for so many societal taboos—friendship, family, and patriotism—are absent from my kind. As a psychic, I can interpret them as the biologically-driven claptrap they are. My consciousness, higher and purer, interprets matters through the lens of an emotionless driven logic. There are allies, enemies, and useless background noise. The first two can switch places at any given time.”

I stared at her. “I see. So, our family has always meant nothing to you.”

Martha snorted. “I do admit to a certain disgust at the realization I was carrying the child of an alien organism. However, it was our father’s wish for me to do so in hopes of continuing his transhumanist wishes.”

“Our father?” I asked, feeling stupid and disgusted. “All of the psychics of New Arkham were his biological children.”

“Ha!” Franz said. “Gabriel is a child of incest as well as cosmic miscegenation. To think you look down upon my illustrious pedigree.”

I felt disgusted. “We are very different, Martha.”

“Yes,” Martha said, moving her finger to the trigger. “I am still human, however evolved, while you are not. Your mother never recovered from the ritual by which Doctor Ward lured her to where he was possessed during the deed. Her alcoholism and self-hatred was comforted only by her husband until she confessed the truth to him and he beat her to death. So take comfort, Booth, you are at least consistent in ruining every family you come into contact with.”

“Not yet,” Franz said.

Martha shot him a glare. Their relationship was not as cordial as she would like it, perhaps because Franz had Martha’s number well before I did.

“The Silver Key,” Franz said, holding out his hand.

“I don’t have it,” I lied.

Franz chuckled again. “Oh, John, you really are a character. Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a horrible liar?”

“No,” I replied, but Martha had many times.

“Give the key,” Martha replied. “Otherwise, I’ll begin seeing how many bullets it takes to destroy a creature like you.”

Blackman had gone into hiding and I didn’t blame him. I was already trying to formulate plans about how to get to the late Detective Jones’ gun or the crystal rod on the ground. Unfortunately, barring mastery of a form I didn’t have anything close to mastery of, I didn’t know how I’d do that.

“It seems that I have a vested interest in not giving you the key since you would kill me either way.”

“I guess we can just kill you and search your corpse,” Martha said, pausing. “I won’t slay you if you’ll stay human or become a bunch of slime.”

I didn’t believe her.

“No!” Franz said, raising his hand again. “He might have been smart enough to hide it.”

I was, in fact, not smart enough to hide it.

“What do you suggest then?” Martha asked, looking with annoyance to the man beside her.

“There is one thing worse than death to a man like Mr. Booth,” Franz said.

“I dunno, I find death pretty intimidating,” I said, doing my best to sound flippant. I was going to go for the crystal rod. Perhaps my new status would give me an advantage in speed over the human psychic and gorilla-human hybrid.

“Slavery,” Franz said.

My blood ran cold, and I made a running leap toward the rod.

“*Chagt’ah vol’um vask molk zadahi*!” Franz lifted his Azathoth eye tipped cane and started speaking the language of the Elder Things.

It was a hideous, nightmarish, and awful thing that shook me to the very core. It also brought back terrible memories of past lives where the monstrous slave lords of a dead civilization had experimented on me for millennia. Chunks of flesh were hacked off, injected, irradiated, and analyzed in hopes of creating a more perfect servant.

I remembered encountering one of the last living Elder Things in the city of Shak'ta'hadron. The creature had given his control spells to the ghouls living there to have the shoggoths become their slaves. The Elder Thing had been willing to pass on his people's knowledge to a race he considered to be inferior in hopes of recreating a shadow out of time. I'd felt the shoggoth's suffering and even today debated the morality of my next action. It was a great horror I'd done even compared to my many other sins, I had unleashed the enslaved shoggoths in a murderous killing frenzy. Slavers or not, the ghouls had included children.

In a way, it was karmic that I felt the spells of control bouncing against my brain and forcing me to my knees. The spell caused my stomach to twist and my flesh to slide down across my face, but it wasn't painful. I was a more malleable creature now. The magic of the Elder Things struggled to take hold of me, though, because they were words made to control a race cloned from R'thugh'cruan.

Still, it was a nightmare to watch my arms elongate and my face to slide across my bones that were themselves becoming soft but feel every part of myself. I was now more akin to modelling clay than a person and able to see out of eyes that began forming alongside tendrils shooting from my form. It was proof positive that any claim to humanity I had now was nothing more than a delusion.

"Give me the key," Franz said, holding up his staff. "Give me the key!"

Martha looked on my transformation with a twisted amusement. "Finally, John, I get to see you as you really are: a monster."

Every movement of my body was a struggle, especially as it was ceasing to exist as an organized body of matter. In other circumstances—like if I was anyone other than myself—I might have been fascinated by the fact that the shape of my body could be determined entirely by will alone. However, I was me and the loss of that was terrifying.

Worse, I could feel my mind disappearing. The human thoughts that came with a body that had limbs, arms, organs, and eyes. No, I started to think shoggoth thoughts. Not even Kastro'vaal but the thoughts of a race that had a lifetime of servitude imprinted into their mind. Beings that were tricked through magic into lives of suffering due to being brainwashed down to their very triple-stranded DNA to obey their masters. It was, as Franz said, a fate worse than death.

So, I made a last-ditch attempt to save myself. “I’ll…give…you…the key.”

My hand, more a tendril, picked up the Silver Key then hurled it at the White Gorilla. Reflexively, the wizard grabbed it.

“Thank you,” Franz said, chuckling. “I think I’ll make you my butler.”

If I was wrong about this, I was fucked.

That was when Franz’s hand around the silver key began to shake before he began to scream. His face melted off his body and the eyes were the last part of the White Gorilla to remain before he turned into a disgusting pile of viscera on the ground. My bullets may not have been able to penetrate his defensive spells, but it seems my son’s curse was.

The death of the White Gorilla—almost anticlimactic as it might have been—freed me from the malfunctioning spell with which he’d been reducing me to a shoggoth’s form. I felt control of my body, strange and alien as it now was, return to me. I pulled myself back together before covering my body in an armored exoskeleton and extending claws from my hands. This was the form of a creature from Carcosa that had become part of the Kastro’vaal race. I had no idea how I knew how to assume the form, but it was instinctual.

Most useful from this was the fact that it possessed two whip like tendrils that shot forth, one of which knocked away Martha’s gun, sending it spiraling across the ground. I did not want to harm her, and disarming seemed the best way to start a dialogue--however unlikely that would prove to be productive.

Martha stared at me as I advanced on her. “Well, shit.”

“*Stand down*,” I said, my voice coming out with a guttural, almost echoing quality.

“I think not,” Martha said, raising her hands like a conductor with a symphony. She proceeded to then lift me off the ground with an invisible force before hurling me across the room, smashing me into one of the pillars of the now burned and ruined temple set. I crashed through its wooden frame and out the other side before rolling on the ground like a child’s ball.

“*Well, that’s new*,” I muttered, feeling only the dim echo of pain through my new body. My wife had always been a telepath rather than a telekinetic. Also, the telekinetics of New Arkham tended to be able to move coins, not throw around people like toys.

“I’ve had two hundred years to increase my connection to the Dream,” Martha said. “I could never master magic, but the raw connection of the Dreamlands? Yes, I can master that just fine.”

It was interesting that it had taken thirty to two hundred years for me to finally get some insight into the sociopathic nuttiness that was my wife’s psyche. It turned out that old saying was correct: you can know a person a dozen years and only know their true character when you point a gun at them.

“You don’t have to do this, Martha,” I muttered, climbing to my feet as my exoskeleton repelled everything from metal braziers to prop stone. She was hurling everything in the building against me and if they had not primarily been creations for the movies, I might have been more than mildly inconvenienced.

“Don’t have to?” Martha scoffed, staring at me with the first real sign of emotion I’d seen from her in a long time: hatred. “I want to do this! You have been an eternal weight on my life, John! You stole my father’s love from me, saddled me with your disgusting spawn, and undermined my position at every turn!”

“You’d be dead if not for Gabriel leading you here!” I snapped, thinking of our dying world.

“Ha!” Martha laughed. “You have no idea what this place really is! We are in the gullet of the Leviathan! I would prefer to be dead, but *he won’t let me die*! Die, shoggoth!”

Martha successfully hurled me again with telekinetic force against the back of the studio wall but with much greater force than before. My body was pressed against the brick that comprised the foundation of the building and held in place. It was impossible to move, and I found myself once more overwhelmed.

“I am not a shoggoth,” I muttered growling. “I am the King Shoggoth!”

The mass that formed a Kastro’vaal or shoggoth’s body was not like a human being’s. They were not made of pure matter as physical reality defined, but of things that existed in both this world and the next.

They could shrink or compress themselves to levels that could not be quantified and in that moment, I took advantage of that ability, reaching out with a whiplike tendril that reached across half the temple before wrapping around the crystal rod by the now bloody mess of Vincent Sage’s bones. It turned out I could do it once I set my mind to it. My arm retracted like a

rubber band and the rod placed itself in my hand. I had no idea how to use the alien technology but so I simply aimed it at Martha before willing it to fire with a single thought: *burn*.

The crystal rod shot forth a blast of glowing energy that exploded at Martha's feet, consuming the mindless form of Malcolm Jones as well as his meal. Martha was sent flying backward, injured but alive, as her telepathic hold on me was dropped. I crashed to the floor where I slowly reverted to my human form.

Much to my surprise, I seemed to be wearing Detective Booth's clothes and I wondered if they were part of my body, or the Elder Things had given their creations the ability to weave matter. I'd once read a science fiction story about something called nanotechnology in the New Arkham Library. Perhaps the shoggoths were, in part, each a gray goo puddle of that matter: able to weave matter and energy together into whatever forms they wished.

Or maybe it was just magic.

"No, no, no," Martha repeated on the ground, half of her face ravaged along with her arm. I was surprised she hadn't gone into shock. "This is not how it is going to be. Not when I was almost rid of you. The Dreamlands will not fill with your vile half-human spawn. You are not a true wizard. You are not a god. That is not yours or Gabriel's destiny. It is mine!"

I stared at her, surprising myself by not denying my divinity but wondering, instead, what drove her to want it instead.

"What makes a god if not his worshipers, Martha? Who slaughters the fatted calf for you?"

Martha's response was to curse me and raise her hands to continue fighting, fruitless as it was. She sat up and snarled at me. "If oblivion be the fate of souls after the valley of death, then I send you to it and laugh at your demise!"

That was when a pistol was pointed the back of her head before a female hand pulled its trigger and ended my wife's—my ex-wife's—life.

I blinked, looking up to see Jessica holding the weapon. Blackman, Jackie, the Baroness, and Penny were behind her. The last was holding a Tommy gun.

"I thought I'd fetch your friends," Blackman said. "They were having a spot of trouble."

"Yeah, there are a lot of dead cops outside," Penny said.

“Good,” I replied, standing up. I walked over to the bubbling red, black, and pink gore pile that was the White Gorilla’s remains. Half of it had been obliterated by the blast I’d fired at Martha from the crystal rod. That part was burned to powdery ash, absent any sign of its former origin. Resting on the top of the pile of ash, undisturbed, was the Silver Key.

My key to meeting my son.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"You didn't have to do that," the Baroness said, looking at Jessica.

"Yeah, but I wanted to." Jessica stared down at the splattered brains of Martha Booth.

"She was a product of New Arkham and Doctor Ward's experiments," the Baroness said, showing a shocking familiarity with the society I'd come from. "There was no way she could be anything other than what she was."

"So was Jessica," Jackie said. "And Booth. They didn't turn out to be complete assholes."

"And Mercury?" the Baroness asked, showing that she was apparently a close friend of Detective Booth.

"Ehh," Jackie said. "I loved Mercury like a mother, and she loved me, but she was an evil bitch."

The Baroness grimaced.

Penny looked over at me.

"So, Booth, are you okay? I mean, your wife being evil and the fact you've become a whatchamacallit."

"I'm not the Booth you know," I said, looking down at Martha and trying to figure out what I felt. I tightened my grip around the Silver Key. "I don't know you."

"Nice to meet you then," Penny said.

"I wish it was under better circumstances," I said, not looking up from Martha's corpse.

In the end, I decided I mostly felt foolish. For decades, I'd made excuses for Martha and believed she was like me and so many others in the New Arkham hierarchy: people who were trying to survive and doing the best we could. Maybe that was a lie we told ourselves, but the lie had its own value that we knew what we were doing was wrong. Martha, it seemed had fully embraced the rhetoric of the human supremacist city-state. The Knights of Arkham weren't a thing she'd allied with for power but something she believed in, or maybe she had just joined for the former but that was functionally indistinguishable in the end.

"Well, congratulations," Blackman said, looking around the location. "You've killed the villains, got the MacGuffin, and saved the girl. The story is now over."

“What girl?” I asked, looking at him.

“Pick one,” Blackman said. “I’m just suggesting you should burn this place to the ground and cover up your involvement.”

I understood what he was saying. If I’d been in trouble before, I was going to be the most wanted man in all of the Dreaming City. The fallout from this massacre would be far reaching and affect everyone from Jessica to, well, Jackie. I didn’t have many acquaintances in the City, but I’d managed to make an enormous mess very rapidly.

“I can fix this,” the Baroness said, surprising me. “The City Council is not made up of the White Gorilla’s friends, only his allies. Any hint that he was trying to ascend himself at their expense is enough to justify his death as well as those of his minions. You may have to take his or your ex-wife’s position, though, to keep order in the city.”

I looked at the Silver Key. “No, that’s not going to happen.”

“Why?” Jessica asked. “We can get the hell out of here. Go to Ulthar, Celephais, Ilek-Vad, or some other part of the Dreamlands. Hell, let’s go to another Earth.”

“Can we do that?” I asked, wondering how Jessica seemed so informed.

“The Silver Key is capable of piercing the mists of not just the Dreamlands but all time, space, and the multiverse,” the Baroness said, once more showing a familiarity I didn’t understand. “It was a gift to Randolph Carter’s uncle from Yog-Sothoth.”

“Yog-Sothoth gives presents?” I asked, confused. The image struck me was strangely funny as if the closest thing the universe had to a capital G god was out there serving as a cosmic Santa. Then again, I struggled with the fact that Yog-Sothoth had sired multiple children with humans—and possibly other races. It made the Kastro’vaal lust for other species look positively pedestrian.

“Randolph Carter used it to construct his Clock of Dreams,” the Baroness said. “The Silver Key is how Gabriel found the Dreaming City.”

“Who are you to me?” I stared at her.

Detective Booth’s memories were of no aid and seemingly absent. It appeared my transition to becoming something more (and less) than human had severed my bond with my doppelganger. He had never been able to accept his suppressed inhuman side. Had I? I wasn’t sure, but I was closer to that than he’d been. It also established the fundamental difference between us: he’d been willing to die nobly, and I wasn’t. I would continue

to struggle to survive at all costs. Perhaps there was meaning there, or nothing at all but the will to live.

“I am a friend,” the Baroness said. “Yours.”

“Of the sexy kind!” Penny said, cheerfully. “You have a lot of those. Is that going to be a change now that you’re all shapechange-y and tentacle-y? I mean I’ve read some of the books out of Little Asia but I never thought they were accurate. But you’re not the only half-shoggoth so I guess what I’m saying is that do you create a thing to use, or do you have em naturally?”

“Penny,” Jessica said.

“Yeah?” Penny asked.

“Shut up,” Jessica said.

“Hey, it’s motivated by scientific interest!” Penny said, unconvincingly. “I’ve got a personal connection to matters of magical body transformation! I also only like chicks so it’s not prudent.”

“Prurient,” Blackman corrected.

“Whatever, pussy,” Penny said.

Great, now I was wondering, too. Still, everything seemed to be in place and that was a small mercy in a world of unholy possibilities. “I’m going to find Gabriel.”

“I would not advise that,” Blackman said.

“Why not?” I asked, undeterred as I put the Silver Key back into my pocket. I was still confused how I was wearing clothes but it occurred to me that everything in this place was a dream so what did it matter. The rules of logic and reality were out to lunch and even my status as a Kastro’vaal or shoggoth reflected my self-image.

“Gabriel is in the Deep Dreamlands,” Blackman said.

“The what?” Jessica asked.

“This is the Near Dreaming, centered around Kadath,” Jackie, who had been silent except for her speech regarding my character, explained. “It’s basically the collective unconscious of humanity and near-humanity.”

“You mean cats,” Blackman corrected. “Humans are just squatting.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “It’s all linked together via the ghoul tunnels: all the Narnias, Olympuses, and Middle Earths. However, the Deep Dreamlands is something else. That’s where the dreamstuff is wild. Where the Great Old Ones—and worse—dream.”

“Worse than the Great Old Ones?” I asked, suffering a failure of imagination there. Surely the only thing more terrifying than them was the Other Gods.

“The Great Old Ones were the most powerful things in your universe,” Blackman said. “However, what about the things that predate your universe?”

I sighed.

“I really didn’t need to know about that.”

“Yes, you do,” Blackman said. “Especially if you’re going into the Deep Dreamlands.”

“Yes,” I replied. “I suppose I do.”

I was ashamed that I was scared to go forward. I looked at my hand and caused it to cycle through a dozen “memories” of other races. An insectoid Yithian claw, a Mi-Go pincer, a squid-like tendril, and more unrecognizable shapes. It made no sense, how these alien biologies could be connected to the rest of me. But, none of this was “real” so what did it matter? Thought was reality here. If I ever returned to the physical world, would I continue to exist or just vanish in a puff of imagination? I had no answer.

I contemplated that going into the Deep Dreaming would be akin continuing on the path of Pre-Rising astronauts into deep space or under the fathoms that had imprisoned Cthulhu, following the path that Randolph Carter had walked past Kadath to ever higher planes of existence, to what I suspected had become his doom rather than ascension. It was probably similar to astral projection, and I would hopefully be protected against environmental hazards. Well, protected against such things as my new alien form may or may not be.

However, something told me the Deep Dreamlands should be feared even by the greatest of warriors. R’thugh’cruan’s people had feared it and they had been accomplished dreamers with vast kingdoms in the mind before their erasure. Yet, there was no real choice here. If Gabriel was there, then I had to go to find my final answers. It would not make up for abandoning him for decades or condemning him to his transformation into a monster without someone to guide him—no matter how good my guidance would have been. It was, however, the least I could do.

Jessica walked up to me and wrapped her arms around me. “Don’t go, John. You don’t need to.”

“I do,” I said, not able to meet her gaze.

All I could think about was the fact I was once more a monster akin to the one that had killed her. Jessica, the real Jessica, or perhaps simply the first, had tried to kill me as a mercy as I was becoming the thing I am.

“Gabriel will return,” Jessica said. “He’s connected to this city, somehow. You don’t need to use the key to visit him. He knows you’re here. If he’s watching you, then he’ll make himself known when he wants to.”

The words coming from her mouth were ones I wanted to hear but not the ones I believed Jessica would say. They were influenced by something else, a script written somewhere and forced into her mind by powers unknown. I had no evidence for this supposition, but something told me in the depths of my now extra-dimensional undifferentiated tissue body that it was the truth.

“I need to see what’s become of him,” I said, staring at her. “I can’t just stay here.”

“Booth doesn’t play house,” the Baroness said.

“Fuck off!” Jessica said, putting her hand to my face. There was a desperation to the touch, and I knew the person created in Jessica’s image was feeling like her life’s purpose was slipping away. “John, I don’t care about what you’ve become. I love you. You’re a hero of the City and it doesn’t matter if you’re human or otherwise. You’re John no matter what and you’ll always have me at your back.”

I stared at her, pained. It was everything I wanted to hear. It was everything I’d wanted to hear from her decades ago when I was undergoing my transformation into a monster. There was a reality where she had been able to accept me, and we’d built a life together in our dying world.

This wasn’t that reality.

I gently, then more forcibly, pushed her away.

“That’s, sadly, how I know you are not the Jessica I knew.”

Jessica slapped me and balled her right first as if she was going to punch me, tears in her eyes, before she walked away. She had been born from a wish, but it had not been my wish. It had been my son’s to give me a happily ever after. But he did not know me, he only knew the impression of me he’d gotten from our short time together.

“Poor John,” the Baroness said. “You never love the people who can accept you for what you are and crave the love of those who would hate you as much as you hate yourself.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I said, remembering the only other woman I’d truly loved—and the awful evil things she did for survival or her own benefit. I shook my head and turned away from the stranger beside me. Then I saw Jackie stare at me, an expression of anger on her face. Jessica was her friend and I’d broken her heart.

“I’m sorry Jackie, I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up, Dad,” Jackie said. “Please. Just go find Gabriel and when you do, tell him he’s an asshole.”

“I will,” I said, sucking in my breath and clutching my hand around the Silver Key absently. “I just need to figure out how to use this thing.”

“Ahem,” Blackman said.

“Yeah,” Penny said, pointing behind me.

I turned around and saw a door standing in the middle of the room where it hadn’t been before. It was closed, and had a plain brass knob. I took a second to look around it and saw that it had seemingly appeared from nowhere.

“Seriously?” I asked.

“No one said the Silver Key had to be hard to use,” Blackman replied. “Previous users just had to go to sleep. That’s not really necessary when you’re already in the Dreamlands.”

Why did I feel like I was a rat running through a maze? Oh, right, because it was obvious this was someone’s scripted drama. I just had no idea whose it was. If it was my son, was it a gift or an elaborate form of revenge? Could I even step outside the role set before me? At this point, I wasn’t sure if I was reality or fiction anymore.

“Then I guess it’s time for me to depart,” I said, looking at Jackie. “Please, talk to Jessica. Don’t let her do anything rash.”

“She was dreamed stronger than that,” Jackie said, but turned around to walk away.

“I may not be coming back,” I started to say.

“Booth…Dad,” Jackie changed her tone. “If there’s one thing that you’re good at, it’s surviving. If you die out there, I’m sure you’ll be back.”

I didn’t dare correct her. Instead, I just watched her leave and contemplated the two remaining people beside me. I also wondered how long it would take for more people to rush in. Depending on the size of the massacre outside, we’d have at least some time before having to explain ourselves.

“You really don’t remember us, do you?” Penny asked.

“I’m sorry, no,” I said.

Penny shrugged. “It’s fine, I’m no one important. Just someone you saved.”

“I hope you made a good life from it,” I replied.

“Oh fuck no,” Penny said, smirking. “I’m reprehensible.”

I smiled. “And you, Baroness?”

“I’ll tell you next time we see each other,” the Baroness said. “I hope you find what you’re looking for on the other side of the universe.”

I almost remembered her.

Then didn’t.

“Yes,” I replied, turning around, and walking through the doorway. The key hummed with a music I didn’t understand, and I found myself no longer where I once was. The sensation of moving from the Near Dreamlands to the Deep Dreamlands was a bit like throwing oneself into the air before being rocketed at speeds faster than the human—or Kastro’vaal—mind could collate.

There was no air where I went but that didn’t matter because I had no body, I had to will that into existence again. There was no up, no down, or even time and space. All of that had to be imagined and I soon found myself inside a pocket of reality formed around me. I pushed it like a soap bubble against the outside until I could have a frame of comprehension. The interior of the bubble was opaque, steamed over with a weird fog that I suspected was my mind just trying to protect me from what was on the other side. It reminded me of a damp windshield of a car on a cold day with the heat turned too high.

Blackman was at my feet. “Oh, that’s clever. Really taking advantage of the fact this is a land of metaphors and ideas here. Most people go mad and get torn to shreds by a stray thought. You made a nice little anchor point. Top marks. Your son did the same thing when he first arrived here.”

I stared down at the cat, wondering how the hell he’d gotten here. “You’re not just a cat, are you?”

Blackman looked up. “No more than you’re a human or Kastro’vaal, or shoggoth for that matter. However, I will be wearing this form for a bit longer.”

“Nyarlathotep?” I asked, guessing.

Blackman snorted. “He does have other things to do, you know.”

I stared. “You are a god, though. Of sorts.”

“I have been worshipped by many,” Blackman said, his smile unsettling. “I’ll give you a clue, you know my name. I am not of the Other Gods, and I am not of those fools who rest on Kadath either. I am neither Kithnid nor Bast nor Thoth nor Nodens. I was once a man but made the journey to the foot of Yog-Sothoth and was transformed into something immortal. Knowledge and art are my gifts but those who learn from me quickly learn to regret it. Who am I?”

“I have not the slightest fucking clue,” I replied.

Blackman frowned. “Riddle talk always seems so much more entertaining in books.”

“That’s because the author knows the answer beforehand,” I replied. “I will note you are awfully chatty for a god.”

“So are you,” Blackman said. “Maybe because it’s we’re both insane.”

“I’m not insane,” I said.

“What would you call a man who talks to termites and chooses to live among them?” Blackman asked. “It’s almost as ridiculous as a cat choosing to live among humans but at least humans are domesticated livestock.”

I took a deep breath. “I need to see where we are.”

“No, you really don’t,” Blackman said.

I ignored him and wiped away the mist from the bubble’s interior to see what lay beyond.

Holy shit.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"What… the fuck… is that?" I said, in perhaps not my greatest moment of elocution.

What I saw beyond the bubble of reality I'd conjured was mercifully distorted, but I could still make out details—details that stripped away what little anchor I had to the universe making sense. The fact I was no longer human—that I was merely pure consciousness here—was something that allowed me to perceive more than whatever should have been seen by mortal minds.

If I still qualified.

The sight was of, for lack of a better terms, a massive growth of something that defied description as either flora or fauna. It had a vague trunk, roots, and branches that spread out from its base throughout surroundings that could best be described as leaves of universes. Yes, universes, for the thing's size was what stunned me.

The thing stretched through the whole of the Dreamlands, physical reality, and several other layers that humans were not aware of. It was forever growing and expanding through other realities, too, conjuring and creating variant universes with each possibility. I shouldn't have been able to take in what I was witnessing but, somehow, I understood.

Someone wanted me to understand.

It was a cancerous growth in the fabric of raw elemental chaos, uncountable possibilities existing as everything all at once before the festering wound infected them. This infection locked them into a single tortured form and created the horrific state of order that allowed existence as I knew it to burst forth from infinity.

The Great Old Ones surrounded this creature, this injury, this ultimate thing. The giant things were like termites burrowed into its side, absorbing its energy, and soothing the terrible madness that radiated out of the painful, horrid existence of it all. I could see that if it ever lashed out or thrashed, then whole swaths of an endless multitude of realities would vanish. Not even Great Cthulhu or Shub-Niggurath were anything other than vermin to it. It was far as above them as they were above me.

"The Tree of Life, Yggdrasill, or any number of other names," Blackman said. "You perceive it through metaphor as I'm letting you see

through my eyes. Others who have looked upon it have perceived it in other ways: a dark tower, a great wheel, and a big bang. It is the thing that holds up all that is, gnawing endlessly on infinity and vomiting forth realities."

"Azathoth," I said, finally understanding.

"Among other names," Blackman said. "It is the terrible sum of the mistake that is everything. Without it suffering, nothing would exist or perhaps everything would. It is from here that the secret of creation was stolen. The fire from the gods so to speak. It is the avatar of this thing, the Tree of Azathoth, that set you on this path. Behold the Father and Mother of the Other Gods. A god that does not care for anything but the terrible music that keeps it asleep, so revel in absolute freedom for no one judges you but yourself."

I couldn't respond, couldn't move, and just sat down in the middle of my bubble for what could have been moments or could have been years. Blackman just stood there, staring at me, until I was able to speak.

"Well, that's messed up," I said, finally collating the sum of my mind's contents.

"Yeah, I agree," Blackman said. "Your son put half of his soul in my conjuration. It allows me to communicate with beings lesser than myself. It also gives me my wicked sense of humor. I suspect that aspect of my summoner was hereditary."

"Does the soul even exist?" I asked, not able to follow Blackman's ramblings.

"Depends on how you define it," Blackman said. "We're all just the products of a giant tumor's dreams after all."

Well that certainly put things in perspective so I rubbed the cat's ears.

"Please don't," Blackman said. "I only like it when Jackie does it."

"Right," I pulled my hand back. "So this is the sum of the universe's truths." I realized that this is what must have driven my son mad.

"There is no such thing," Blackman said. "Truth is infinite and nonexistent."

"If all things are possible then all things are real, as well as none of it," I said. "If there are an infinite amount of realities, all choices are arbitrary."

"Except of course to you," Blackman said. "The Mystics of Ped-La, Tibetan Buddhists, and Shepherds of Hali know that whenever you talk to a god, you are talking as much to yourself as the reverse."

"Is my son on that thing?" I asked.

“We’re all on that thing,” Blackman said.

I sighed, annoyed with the cat. “Will you ever give a straight answer?”

“No,” Blackman said. “What makes you think I’m on your side in all this?”

I blinked. He had a point. “Alright then, I guess I need to look for him.”

“It could take you a million lifetimes, each lasting a million years, and you would still be surrounded by a sea of ever-growing places to look,” Blackman said. “Unfortunately, I know you’d do it so I’m just going to tell you to use the key.”

I’d forgotten about its existence.

“Will it help here?”

“Everything you could think of is here, Booth,” Blackman said. “Many a sorcerer has ventured here in hopes of becoming a god. They usually find themselves eaten by a stray thought, but woe is the ones who get exactly what they want.”

A part of me wanted to know where Yog-Sothoth fit into all of this—and Nyarlathotep—but I suspected the answers would be my final end. I had already crossed the line of what man was not meant to know and run screaming past it. “So, just close my eyes and wish for it?”

“And don’t imagine a monster eating you while you have your eyes closed,” Blackman said. “Despite how hilarious that would be.”

“You are an evil little cat,” I responded.

“Thank you,” Blackman said. “I am as your son envisioned me.”

Blackman’s constant taunts, allusions, and hints were becoming infuriating. Unfortunately, I couldn’t figure it out. The pieces simply would not fit together into a coherent picture. Perhaps that was because I’d been raked over the proverbial coals by my wife, faced the end of my world, experienced Jessica’s pseudo-resurrection, and discovered that my son had become some sort of deity at a terrible price. Maybe, under those circumstances, I might cut myself a little slack that my mind was unable to catch up.

“Catch up, John, or fall behind. Just remember that to fall behind is to die, regardless of whether your family thinks you’re immortal,” Blackman said.

“Fine.” I closed my eyes and thought of Gabriel.

I did my best to keep my thoughts clear and hoped that a stray thought didn’t send me to Cthulhu’s feet or into bubbling lava. Indeed, as I thought

that, I fully expected to wake up in the middle of bubbling lava with Cthulhu but instead found myself somewhere decidedly different.

It was a house.

Specifically, an all-too-human study inside a house. The walls were covered in books, mostly the same sort of pulps I'd found in his temple but a few occult resources, and there was a roaring fireplace. The place had the warm scent of cinnamon to it and there were big stuffed leather chairs. A staircase led up to a second floor and there were multiple doors present but, strangely, no windows. The style of the place told me it was a Pre-Rising house, perhaps around the 1920s or even older. There was a vague noise in the background that I couldn't quite place but sounded like…typing?

There was a dining table to the side of the study and on it was a model city of impeccable design. It was a reproduction of the Dreaming City and had moving parts spread through it. I could even see Angelwood's hills on the outskirts. There was something sinister about it, like it seemed to change whenever I looked away, growing slightly larger or moving around its pieces. A stuffed doll resembling Jackie seemed to watch me. Weirdly, I almost found the juxtaposition worse than Azathoth outside, as if the familiarity was worse than the surreal.

Blackman stretched on the ground. "Well, this is nicer than I expected."

"I'm going to regret asking, but where the hell are we now?" I inquired.

"The Empty House," Blackman said. "An archetypal representation of the concept of home that exists as a bulwark against the sanity-blasting horrors outside. It is an infinite angled location formed from the unconscious longing for a place that one can be safe and thus empowered by all species' idea of it."

"Really?" I asked.

"No," Blackman said. "This is just Gabriel's workshop."

I debated taking off my shoe and throwing it at Blackman. "Do you take anything seriously?"

"Everything of importance," Blackman replied. "You must realize by now that the only reason you're here is the Dreaming King wants you to be. I've been assigned the role of Iago or Montressor to guide you along the path to him."

"Iago and Montressor both killed the person they led around," I replied.

"Yes," Blackman said. "But Virgil was too obvious an allusion."

"Does my son even want to see me?" I asked.

“Don’t be silly,” Blackman said. “If he didn’t, you wouldn’t be here. I will warn you, though, that you are in the heart of Carcosa now. In the kingdom of Hali, on the Plateau of Leng.”

“In the Eye of Azathoth,” I said. “We are in the King in Yellow’s court. It’s not safe here.”

“It’s not safe anywhere,” Blackman said.

There was a ding noise as if someone had reached the end of a line on a typewriter. “He’s here, isn’t he?”

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?” Blackman asked. “Tell me, what do you hope to find?”

I paused. “Redemption.”

“There is no redemption in Hell, Booth,” Blackman said.

“All the devils have left and they are here,” I said. “My son and I always shared a love of reading. That’s why there are so many damned literary allusions.”

“Carcosa is where all art is born,” Blackman said. “It is why there is nothing new under the son.”

“I want to free my son,” I replied. “I want to take him from this place and bring him back to his people. To sever his relationship with the evil gods he’s sold himself to and let him live a normal life. Maybe with someone or someones he loves.”

“And if that ship has sailed?” Blackman asked, cocking his head to one side. “What if he’s become too corrupted? So much a monster that there is nothing left of the boy you knew? What if his existence is nothing but a perversion of everything that life should be?”

I didn’t have an answer to that. “Is that what the Tree of Azathoth meant?”

That was when there was a large thumping and smashing noise in the next room. I turned my head just in time to see a naked, feral Franz Jermyn smash through the nearest door and charge at me. His body had grown a thick coat of white fur and his eyes blazed with animalistic fury. I barely had time to react before the White Gorilla smashed into me, slamming me up against the wall with enough force to threaten to shatter my back.

I tried to change, to call upon the shoggoth powers I was supposed to be able to use now, but I couldn’t because I still thought of myself as human despite the vast number of alien memories in the back of my mind. Instead,

I clawed the monster's eyes with my hand and slammed my elbow into its face. That caused Franz to drop me and back away a step.

Whether Franz was an illusion or somehow resurrected in this place, I didn't know, but the Thul-human hybrid grabbed me and hurled me like a ragdoll across the room into a set of bookshelves. The lurid pulp titles fell on top of me as my entire body burned with the pain of my beating. Stripped of his reason, intellect, and sorcery, Franz was still a terrifying opponent with all the strength of his simian ancestors. I found myself reminded of the Cimmerian's legendary battle against a carnivorous ape and struggled to remember the details.

"*N'ak'tah*!" Franz shouted in an alien language, or simply a shout of madness. He lifted one of the leather chairs off the ground then hurled it at me, only adrenaline and reflexes honed by hundreds of fights moving me out in time.

I went for a fire poker to try to hold off the creature, but Franz managed to grab it and knock it out of my hand. Franz grabbed me by the front of my shirt and threw me a second time, this time through the doorway it had smashed down. I slid down a long, smooth, marble floor in a white hallway with no doors along the sides.

"*N'agha*, *nagha*, *zool*, *kuk*," Franz grunted and grumbled before walking toward me on all four appendages. He seemed like he was trying to communicate with me but had forgotten how to speak any Earthly language.

Realizing that communication was useless, Franz lifted his fists above his head and prepared to bring them down on me in killing blow. I responded my reaching for Mercury's Gift and shooting the ape-man in the head. This time, the bullet went through his skull and I fired a few more times before the gorilla fell backward onto the ground.

Dead.

Hopefully for good.

"Fucking Nazi gorilla," I muttered. I climbed to my feet then shot a couple of more times to make sure that his head was completely destroyed.

"Didn't you run out of bullets back at the studio?" Blackman asked, walking up to the corpse.

I looked down at him. Once more, he'd successfully managed to disappear from the fight when things got dangerous.

I stared at him then opened my mouth to respond. Realizing he had a point, I lifted the gun up to eye level and blinked.

“Huh, I guess I’d forgotten that.”

“Funny,” Blackman said.

“Was that the real Franz?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” Blackman asked.

“No idea,” I replied. “That’s why I’m asking.”

“He prepared for his death,” Blackman responded. “When Gabriel’s spell destroyed him, his spirit was freed from its earthly prison and transported itself to the Empty House. He hoped that once here, he could steal your son’s form to become a god.”

“And what happened?” I asked.

“He couldn’t open the door to your son’s room,” Blackman replied. “He ended up spending a few thousand years alone as a result. There’s an awful mess upstairs.”

I stared down at him.

“Jesus.”

“No, Gabriel,” Blackman said. “Though some religions associate the two. So, are you ready to meet your son?”

I shook my head.

“No.”

“No?” Blackman asked, surprised.

“No,” I replied. “I am goddamn sick of being led around by the nose. I want to know who the fuck you are and I want to know right now.”

The only sound that could be heard in that moment was the eerie clacking of keys coming from down the hall. For a second, I thought that I’d crossed some invisible line with the demon or god or both that I was traveling with. It was a sadistic and evil creature, no matter how friendly it was, and it was more powerful than it let on. Knowing its true nature might have given me an advantage but it could also simply put plainly what we both knew to be the case: I was the mouse with which it was playing.

Blackman looked up at me with his head cocked to one side.

“Why didn’t you say so, Booth? All you had to do was ask.”

Why did I have the feeling I’d made a huge mistake?

Oh right, I had.

Blackman proceeded *change*.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Blackman transformed before my eyes and soon became a golden-skinned, yellow-eyed humanoid with no hair, dressed in a fedora and suit made of yellow fabric. It was not quite a perfect replica of a human being, more like if someone had created a simulation of a human from statuary despite the fact Blackman had been around us for however long we wished.

Us?

What a terrifying joke. My delusion of being a human being was shattered once more and I could never recover it. I wondered why Blackman was now assuming a human form before looking down at his shadow. I saw the outline of a tentacled insectoid thing that was covered in some sort of hooded robe that didn't cover everything but left tantalizing hints of its vile nature. A sight that instinctively filled me with both revulsion and fear on a primordial level. I was not in the presence of a shapeshifting cat any more than I'd been in the presence of a human with Nyarlathotep.

"Blackman?" I asked, knowing that answer was no longer.

"Not quite," the figure spoke. "It is but one guise I have worn across the multiverse of universes I've lived through the lifespan of."

I stared at him. "Who are you?"

"Guess," Blackman said. "There's not that many deities you know."

"*Hastur,*" I said, knowing I was now in the presence of my son's god.

It smiled in a slightly unnatural way.

"Or one of its avatars at least," Hastur spoke. "The King in Yellow wishes to comprehend and understand beyond even what being one of the Great Ones can bring and that requires perspectives of things that other beings cannot comprehend. Think of me as a microbiologist or etymologist."

"And that's somehow aided by pretending to be a cat?" I asked.

"Better than being a human," Hastur said, reaching down and picking up the walking stick of the late White Gorilla.

The Kastro'vaal inside me retreated further into me and I was terrified of Hastur casually willing me away. Even in the nameless epoch and distant galaxy my ancestors came from, the Lord of Hali and King of Cascosa was

known. My hope that it was too alien and distant to ever deal with mortals was shattered in an instant. Somehow, the fact it was here talking with me was so much worse than it being a remote god that could not hope to speak with mankind.

“Why?” I asked, wondering if it would destroy me with a wave of its hand or sentence me to endless madness.

“I decided to come check upon the Great Messenger’s pet,” Hastur spoke, making me realize this had all been for the Great Old One’s amusement. “You are his cat, and it amuses him more to play with you than most of his toys. It was amusing to play act the role of a similar creature for a time, but as you have shaken off the guise of humanity, it was time to do the same myself. We are in the final leg of this journey, and I felt it was only proper to lead you to the end.”

“Where is my son?” I asked, daring to put venom in my voice despite knowing there was absolutely nothing I could possibly do to affect this being.

“Behind you,” Hastur said.

I reluctantly closed my eyes—half expecting not to be able to open them again—and I turned around. When I opened my eyes again, I saw a yellow wooden door at the end of the hall, which twisted and turned before becoming far longer than it was before. The corpse of the White Gorilla vanished as well, leaving me alone with Hastur as an endless hallway with an infinite number of replica doors behind me.

“He’s behind the door,” I said, sucking in my breath.

“Yes, that’s what I said,” Hastur said. “Allow me to walk with you, John. Otherwise, you might never make it. It never ceases to amaze me how semi-intelligent beings are reduced to gibbering drooling madmen by the presence of the Great Ones. After all, if I wanted to do you harm, would I simply not do it?”

“You’re a cat,” I said, making a joke. “Playing with your prey is what you do.”

Hastur’s expression became even. “Correct. Of course, this isn’t me. I struggle to think of a metaphor for it that would make sense. Cells in my body, an errant thought brought to life, or a single finger reaching down to press itself through the surface of the pond of lesser dimensions. Your son summoned me to be his god, a portion of my essence, and gave me this personality as well as embodiment with his prayers.”

“You’re an avatar he made with his dreams,” I said, thinking. “That’s how all the cults of the Great Old Ones are created, isn’t it? They sense the psychic presences of great intelligences like yourselves in the Dreamlands and use them to sculpt their ideas of gods.”

It potentially explained religion as a concept across human history as well as potentially other worlds as well. Perhaps that was why Nyarlathotep sought to nurture and answer prayers of various peoples, continuing his gardening of consciousnesses to fill the ranks of beings around Azathoth’s court.

“Close enough,” Hastur said, walking beside me. “He sought the knowledge of Randolph Carter so he could save humanity’s remnants on Earth-17,191,274. At least how I number them. Randolph Carter could not help him, fruitlessly battling still with his enemy in the sorcerer inside him. So, he turned to me, and I led him here. I asked him what price he was willing to pay, and you don’t need to be told what his answer was.”

We reached the door. “Everything,” I said. “My son would be willing to sacrifice everything.”

I’d known the answer. He’d shown me the answer.

I just hadn’t wanted to believe it.

“It was the example of his father that inspired him,” Hastur said, amused. “He did not realize that you always sacrifice those around you and feel bad about it.”

“A petty dig for a god to make,” I replied, reaching down to the doorknob and turning it. The moment I did, the typing noise became deafening.

“Well, I was created by your son,” Hastur said. “I know how he really felt.”

I opened the door and was immediately washed over by a nauseating, horrific smell that made me want to fall to my knees and vomit. I pushed forward and found myself in a fetid chamber made of alien meat, pulsating, oozing, and gyrating. Noxious gases poured from orifices and crevices spread as I felt like I was in the bowels of a gigantic leviathan.

Except, of course, for the utter strangeness of the sight of a writing desk in the middle of the chamber where a typewriter sat. Typing away, naked, was the emaciated form of my son, his skin sagging. Dozens of long, thick, rope-like tendrils pierced his flesh and pumped fluids in and out of his body. His eye sockets were empty, replaced with typewriter keys that

clicked and clacked with each movement of his fingers along the machine. Stacks of paper were scattered around the rolling, tongue-like floor, some of them in huge stacks while others floated in puddles of greenish-white puss.

You would think the horrifying sight of what had become of my son would drive me mad, running screaming from the room, or perhaps to murderous rage. Instead, like a man going into shock, I couldn't even face it or acknowledge it. Instead, I averted my eyes from the surreal crucifixion and machine-man-monstrous organ that was before me as if my mind simply could not process it. It was something I could not think about, so I shut it out and looked everywhere but directly at him in hopes it would magically go away.

But it would not.

When the cold undeniable reality of it hit me fully, I had no doubt I would go mad and scream like I had never screamed before. Until then, though, I could keep myself sane long enough to explore this hideous place in hopes of finding a cure or rationale to the horror. Perhaps once I deduced there was nothing I could do, I would take Mercury's Gift, put it to my head, and pull the trigger. But I had a few fleeting moments of sanity left to explore my son's horrific prison under the gaze of Hastur's appraising eyes.

Stepping through the surreal nightmare, I walked up to one of the stacks of paper, picked it up off the ground and read its contents. "Joanna Whiteman was a thirty-two-year-old woman who was long past her prime due to the harshness of life in the streets, the needle, and the abuses she'd suffered in the home. However, she had discovered God, and this had liberated her from her past horrors. The true name of God, Yog-Sothoth, had been whispered in her dreams by a nightgaunt. It was eating her up in a new way but she…"

"What is this trash?" I asked, looking back at Hastur. He was not there.

Instead, my attention was drawn to the walls that began cracking open like a womb and producing forth the hands of an adult woman. A weathered, slime-covered woman emerged and stood before me with a blank expression on her face.

I stared at the abomination that I instinctively knew was Joanna Whiteman, or at least was supposed to take upon her role. There were many other factoids in her "life" ranging from family ties to other City-dwellers to the kind of food she ate. It even listed when she would die, a hundred and twelve years later, killed in a meaningless robbery.

Another part of the living walls opened up beside me, leading to an apartment in the heart of the City. I could tell by the noise and the sights visible in the windows within. The polluted—but better smelling—air of the City filled my lungs. The zombie-like Joanna shuffled toward the chamber, the slime sliding off her skin with her every movement before she flopped onto a chair inside the room. The living walls sealed shut as quickly as they'd opened,

"This is the womb of the City," Hastur said, behind me again. He was speaking with Gabriel's voice now. "Just as the remains of your dear baby boy is the brain."

I turned around to face the avatar of the Great Old One and saw that he looked identical to the Gabriel that everyone had been describing for the past two centuries. The snotty, arrogant, mad, cruel genius who wore only the finest of suits while engaging in the most depraved of luxuries.

It occurred to me that the Gabriel whom Detective Booth had fallen sway under and protected from so many scandals, as well as killed for, might well have been Hastur the entire time. After all, what human would he be better at impersonating than the one whose mind had conjured his reflection on this world?

"What did you *do* to him?" I asked, finally unable to deny the thing still typing away madly at my side.

"Nothing he did not do to himself," Hastur replied. "He arrived here in an abandoned, decaying dream of Randolph Carter's with a few hundred starving and disease-ridden followers, one more incestuous refugee tribe that would join the others living out a poverty-stricken existence among the mad wizard lords who ruled over their slaves in the City. He might have kept them from falling prey to the horrors here and provided with his dreaming, but he wanted more. So much more."

"I must know," I said, my voice desperate and choking.

"To know is to be a driven mad by the revelation. So, of course, allow me to help," Hastur said, reaching out with a long bony finger that was long decayed and from no human appendage. It touched the top of my forehead and filled my mind with the truth. It had been Hastur, all along, filling mind with images of my other selves.

What I saw was that Gabriel needed more dreams and dreamers to create and mold the world around him. He was no Randolph Carter, no matter how powerful his vision, and his ability to shape the City was limited.

Furthermore, he needed organic mass to be conjured from the raw stuff of thought in the Dreamlands. That required magic to tap the creative power of Azathoth, whose blind, idiot thrashings made all the universes of the multiverse.

So, he'd turned to his own flesh and blood to create children. Moreover, he'd turned to his *writing*. The conjurations of Hastur allowed him to become like a fungus and with loathsome couplings with Shub-Niggurath as well as other gods, he grew throughout the city. His stories allowed him to birth adults, fully formed as Athena from Zeus' brow, that were not just dream substances in this world. They added their dreamscapes and dreams to his ever-expanding mind and power.

I was wrong about Hastur impersonating my son, though not far, for Gabriel had his own avatars spread throughout the city. Indeed, Gabriel was in most of the populace living out his scripted dramas. His essence was in every coupling, cult, and being, which he harnessed as fuel to sustain the dream while expanding this living refuge for a dead humanity. They were the cells in his blood, traveling along the arteries of his streets, and pumped through the organs of an eco-system of pipes and steel.

"My God, Gabriel *is* the City," I said, falling on the ground and trembling with the revelation.

"Yes," Hastur-Gabriel replied. I could no longer separate the two in my mind and worried, indeed, that I was going mad without the blessedness of insensibility. "He is the first new Great Old One since wretched Dagon and Mother Hydra were spawned in the ages undreamed. Though I suppose the phrase Great New One would be more appropriate, but he is not immortal yet."

My hands were soaked in the slime around me and my mind still mulling over the sheer disgust and horror of what was being described. It took me a second—a second that felt like an eternity—to truly hear what the Hastur-Gabriel was saying.

"What?" I asked.

"He has *vulnerabilities*," Hastur-Gabriel said. "Weaknesses from his human side. Sentimentality. Why do you think he has produced so many Booths over the years if not for some Elektra complex? It is why he brought forth your doppelgangers and why he showered them with gifts. Detective Booth could not handle the revelation about his Jessica and that is why he

began cheating on her so regularly, beyond the other excuses of mortals to rut with one another as Shub-Niggurath intended."

I almost vomited at the implications, imagining Jessica coming forth from one of these spawning pits. That was the reason why she was so different in personality and sporadic in my memories—she was my son's idea of her. An idealized fantasy he had created for her from my wishes, or other Booths' wishes.

"Am I even real?" I asked, confused, and terrified. "Or am I just another product of Gabriel's longings for his long dead father?"

"I can't possibly see how that matters," Hastur-Gabriel replied. "You are both things that should not be. Alan Ward summoned a Kastro'vaal into himself with Nyarlathotep's aid and impregnated your mother with the spawn of a creature that only existed in between time. A miscegenation of human-alien-god flesh that passes on its curse to each new generation. It is the only reason you are still alive, because you dream around yourselves that you are the heroes of your own stories, passing along the entropy onto the others around you."

Gamma Squadron. The seven gathered to find the Tower of Zhaal. Martha. All of these companions of mine killed so I could live. Sacrifices that I'd unwittingly made to add their years to myself. Or maybe I was adding meaning to the meaninglessness of death. I could not bring myself to deny Hastur-Gabriel's words, though.

"He is fueled by the conflict," I said, searching for a word. "The sin and darkness of this city as much as the light."

"Yes," Hastur-Gabriel said. "Just as you are fueled by the bloodshed. You can live an eternity, John, if you only keep killing. Also, avoid encounters with things like me. It will be a miserable and horrifying life, though."

"Can I help Gabriel?" I asked, staring at my son, living now forever in a state of eyes folded backward into his skull. Looking into himself. That is, if he had eyes.

"If you mean kill him," Hastur-Gabriel said, smiling. "His human mortality hangs by a thread. Soon, he will become a creature that lives only in his stories, as alien a mind as any of us. A god who will rule over a city, a kingdom, a planet, and eventually a universe. But you can free him from this quest and prevent a Great Old One from reaching maturity by killing it in its womb."

I laughed. It was a bitter, horrified, and deranged laugh.

But sincere.

Hastur smirked. “I see you now get the joke.”

“Mister Death’s curse,” I said, continuing to laugh until my throat was raw with the disgusting air around me. Perhaps I would have suffocated if I still believed myself to be human, but even that was denied me.

“Yes,” Hastur-Gabriel said, chortling. “You and Doctor Ward’s daughter were meant to be the Adam and Eve of a new reality, his incestuous children with Nyarlathotep’s blessing, but even the God of a Thousand Faces could not predict one killing the other. Now you must decide whether to let your son transform fully into a great abomination churning out a thousand young every month to feast on their dreams, or to grant him the merciful relief that you so long have claimed to desire.”

“Even if it means the death of everyone here,” I said, thinking of the survivors that had gone on to have their own families, often with those very cloned humans created from the petri dish of my son’s mutated flesh.

“They have a good run,” Hastur said. “But all good things—and even bad—must come to an end.”

I pulled out Mercury’s Gift and stared at the weapon, hearing the insane clack-clack-clacking of keys in front of me. The best thing for everyone was to end this horrific farce, and then end myself.

I raised the pistol.

Epilogue

I did not pull the trigger.

God, whatever name they go by or whatever lesser being humanity has worshiped in their dreams or crazed imagination, how I wish I had.

I could not.

I wanted to.

Believe me, I have replayed that moment in my life multiple times with a different result. However, I was weak and utterly human in the moment I really wish I could have been the monster I'd always imagined myself becoming. I could not kill my son, not to prevent him from becoming a Great Old One or to put an end to the nightmarish horror factory that his life had become to any sane or rationale adult.

Indeed, it would have been comforting to believe that it was only sentiment and human weakness that crippled me in that moment. I could have forgiven myself for that and would have put the gun to my head and pulled the trigger. One of us would be damned but the other would be dead for their refusal to save their maligned mutated soul.

Instead, there was a darker feeling and one I cannot fully say was selfish or selfless but had enough of both to disgust me. The selfish part of my soul wanted to live but also wanted to live in the City. To experience life and its joys in a way that could not exist anywhere else in the Dreamlands with the people of my dead Earth, or at least reasonable facsimiles thereof. It was so monstrous a crime, condemning my son to the state he'd confused for godhood, that to call it evil would-be understating matters.

I could have killed myself for that as well.

But it was the selfless part of that motivation that also disgusted me because of the logic by which its conclusion had been reached: I wanted the others to live too. I wanted Jackie, the false Jessica made in this dark womb, those poor cats I'd rescued, and the millions of other residents in the City to continue on with their lives. It was a vile calculus and I did not object to the numbers so much as the very premise that I chose them over my son.

A deranged part of my mind wanted to justify the choice beyond selfishness and selflessness too. To imagine the horrific transformation of Gabriel Booth from human to Kastro'vaal to Wizard God to Living City to I Did Not Know What was an apotheosis perhaps not wholly horrifying. He

had always been an artistic sort and now was living inside his creations as a gestalt of eight million people in the Dreaming City. He was also the Dreaming King, a higher consciousness manifesting itself in the parts of his eternally written story that he wished to focus on. He had created Detective Booth's life and Jessica reborn for me as a perverse way of making me feel at home.

He needn't have bothered. I could never be at home in the Dreaming City now that I knew its horrific price for existing. I dared not allow myself the comforting delusion that my son was happier as a god on the cross of being strapped to his typewriter for eternity, carrying out a Sisyphean task so that others might live. An eternal martyr preserving the Ark and living vicariously through me and his other pulp stories. If I did that, I would truly be one of the people that did not deserve to be called human. No matter if that sort of self-delusion was the most human thing I could do in the face of such awfulness.

I did not think my decision surprised Hastur and the King in Yellow dissolved into the darkness before I ended up appearing in Detective Booth's bed. A new Jessica was waiting for me in Detective Booth's office and there was a Martha Booth to replace the one killed by the Second Jessica.

This Martha Booth was helpful, friendly, and pleasant—which meant I could easily dismiss her as another reconstruction. It also told me the one killed had probably been the original, but Gabriel had no further desire to return her to life. She had disappointed him for the last time, and he had re-envisioned her character as someone worthier for the title of mother in his story. She was still a crooked police officer, though, and the Knights of Arkham were continuing their unruly behavior with new leaders. Gabriel's construction thrived on stories of sex, lies, violence, and occultism—which meant he needed villains. I had to wonder what sort of life it was to be envisioned as nothing more than an obstacle to another man's story.

Even when that other man was me.

Time settled into a kind of dull, grinding routine that somehow managed to be endless repetitive excitement. The limits of my son's writing capacity became apparent as I found myself trapped in a never-ending series of investigations. An endless series of beauties, mobsters, cultists, and tragic stories brought themselves to my desk.

A man believed his wife was cheating on him and I proved that by sleeping with her before discovering her dreadful secret involving body snatching. An asylum inmate had disappeared from his cell, only to involve a horrifying tale of resurrection. A frightened math student believed a witch was living in their house.

Stories I found were as often plucked from the weird fictions of Randolph Carter—themselves based on events in his hometown of Old Arkham—found in the Dreaming City Library. Redheaded Treasury Bureau agents, classy cat burglars, and corrupt female bootleggers mixed with bloody shootouts seemed to be my son's chief contribution to "improving" them.

I played my role in these stories despite intellectually knowing that none of them mattered and we were all just actors on a celestial stage. It was possible to confuse myself enough to believe they were important to the people who were living them, however artificial the setup, as well as my son keeping his godlike mind preoccupied. I tried not to think of the Freudian overtones inherent in it all.

As the above paragraphs indicate, I could not return Jessica's devoted and loving care for me knowing what I did about her own lack of free will in it. She had been made to love me and my desire that she find someone new or forge her own identity fell on deaf ears even when I tried to explain. Our relationship suffered even as I could not help but work with her and love her for all the memories of my "real" life.

Likewise, my relationship with Jackie began to deteriorate as she could not understand why I developed a bitter and angry attitude towards everyone and everything in the City. My violent, hateful screed when she said she was going to try to make it work again with the resurrected Gabriel at Yellow King Studios resulted in her not speaking to me for a month.

Other changes to my behavior were that I began to fear the sound of typewriters and could no longer tolerate them in my office, let alone my presence. I took to reading esoterica and seeking religion, despite and because of what I knew about the so-called gods, simply because I needed some greater meaning in life.

Given the sleazy, seedy nature of the City, it should not surprise you to find out that the majority of the faiths I investigated proved to be harboring some sort of dark secret or another. The best faiths were crooked scams designed to bilk their followers of their earnings while others plied their

flock with sex, drugs, and drivel. The worst were horror shows that reminded me that as bad as I found the City, there were worse gods than my son.

I was becoming Detective Booth.

This, as our memories fully merged, was self-evident.

He'd been down an almost identical path.

Even visiting the Womb of the City.

Making the same choice.

Dying.

Even that option was now denied me because, of course, I would just be replaced by yet another Booth plucked from the multiverse.

Or so I told myself.

Some days I simply refused to participate, sitting on my ass, and reading literature or watching the television of centuries-long dead civilizations. One movie about a bunch of human beings trapped by machines in a shared dream called *The Matrix* leapt out at me but I could not figure out how to apply its ending to my own life. Eventually, I returned to the cases because people died when I didn't participate, and I knew they felt pain. It was an empathy I wish I could have removed.

You may wonder how my transition from human to Kastro'vaal to shoggoth or whatever combination of the three I may be now affected me. The answer was, almost anticlimactically, not very much. I barely experimented at all with my new state and while I had far more control over it than I ever had in the Wasteland, my usage of it was almost entirely utilitarian. I survived injuries I might not have survived otherwise, healed quicker than any mortal, and occasionally assumed my "war form" when outnumbered or outgunned. But I lived an almost distressingly normal life otherwise—food, sex, sleep, and defecation.

Indeed, perhaps the most terrifying revelation I'd had since my son's present state had drowned out all other horrors, was the discovery that it was not merely demihumans living lives of false humanity inside the Dreaming City. Several times, I passed by men and women who looked at me with a curious gaze before I returned it. Inside them, I saw shapeless black extradimensional things, wearing the visage of humanity like a suit.

Sometimes these beings had spouses or children that might or might not be of similar kind. I did not approach them, nor did they approach me lest our shared illusion of humanity be destroyed. It seemed that my acceptance

of my dual nature was still conditional—disappointing as that may be to those who cared to see me achieve true symbiosis. It would not be found here as routine was my refuge from the horrors I knew this city was built on.

Indeed, it was the odd break in my routine that was the most disturbing for me. The cases that did not fit the pattern I'd fallen into and solved like clockwork, week after week, but veered in odd yet shocking directions. Cases where nothing wrong at all turned out to be the results, things that ended peacefully, or someone was simply reunited with a loved one or lost pet. These were the terrible yet wonderful moments when I realized I was dealing with *real* people. Travelers from other Dreamlands, parallel realities, or the descendants of refugees from my Earth that had been born the old-fashioned way.

The discovery of other "real people" is what motivated the action that, almost a year to the day, I decided to undertake. Sitting at my desk, a fountain pen in hand, I wrote a long form letter to the only two people I truly cared about in this dreadful place:

> Dear Jessica and Jackie,
>
> I have not been good to you. In either of my lives. I know you continue to love me, a status that I have resented instead of cherished, but it has been a trying experience. When you have attempted to mend the rift between us, I have shouted at you that this world is an illusion and forgotten the maxim of the ancient Cimmerian:
>
> "Let teachers and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content."
>
> These are from the Nemedian Chronicles, written ten thousand years prior to the death of our world. I read them

when I was a boy in New Arkham and should have kept them close to my heart instead of disregarding them out of spite.

I am leaving.

If you find this statement contradictory to the above statement of apology for abandoning you, I do not blame you. It is a particularly difficult needle to thread and one that has required much thought as well as careful self-analysis—of the kind that this world seems deliberately designed to distract from.

In simple terms, I accept the illusion as a dream that is as real as flesh or steel. It no longer matters its origins if the people are capable of independent thought. I cannot prove they are, but I think the assumption they do is one to better err on the side of caution regarding.

No, I am leaving because I wish to save this place.

In the libraries of this bizarre extension of my son's imagination is a short story called "Those Who Walk Away From Omelas" that speaks of a city sustained by the inhuman magics of a child's torture. One can scarcely avoid drawing the parallel even if Gabriel is an adult man of centuries of life now. The ending of the story speaks of a handful of individuals who refuse to reap the fruit of this bitter harvest and leave.

But what if everyone left?

Outside of the Dreaming City are a host of other civilizations both human and otherwise, as well as their dreams. Many of which we trade with, but others we avoid with the proverbial (and literal) "Here be Dragons." Parallel

worlds, multiversal constructs, and pocket universes exist alongside the spiritual reflections of the Great Old Ones' dreams.

Out there must be some Elysium or refuge that the people of the Dreaming City can settle in a way that does not require living on a giant turtle's back. Whether I can find such a place by journeying across uncharted worlds, past the moons of Saturn, or through the dreams of Cthulhu himself—I believe it is worth trying.

But I also will be seeking a weapon. I believe Hastur, or at least the Hastur avatar created from my son's magic, is the evil heart of his torment. I want to find a weapon to kill it and see if that relieves the darkness inside Gabriel. I do not expect to survive, let alone succeed, in either of these quests but I will try.

And that will make my life worth living.

With love,

John

It was not the best written prose I'd ever created but I spoke my mad plan from the heart and it was the first time I truly felt myself in a very long time. I did not know if freeing my son from the millions of people depending on him and destroying the Hastur thing he'd created would allow him peace. Perhaps it would allow him to complete his apotheosis into something alien but sane. But, it was worth trying.

I had allowed myself to succumb to the temptations of city life. The ease of booze, sex, and civilization were poison in the heart of a man born to live in the Wasteland. I was a barbarian at heart, forged in the purity of the austere desert rather than the corruption of New Arkham. Gathering a

simple duffle bag worth of goods and my revolver and gun belt, I was prepared to catch a steamer ship to Ilek-Vad where Randolph Carter had formerly been king. According to the people here, that had been millennia ago as Dreamlanders reckoned it, but it was as good of a place to start my quest as any.

I had traded in my detective's trench coat for my duster and Stetson once more. Being a private detective had its rewards, but I'd been drowning in the corruption and moral compromises. I was a murderer, thief, and a whoremonger in the Wasteland but that had nothing on the evils of civilization. I would miss Jessica and Jackie both, but neither needed me and perhaps they would do better without me. Besides, if Nyarlathotep and Hastur both wanted me here then that was good a reason not to stay.

I should have known better than to tempt fate that way.

"John, we need to talk," a soft female voice spoke from the door to my office. Somehow, the owner had managed to get in without breaking down the door despite it being both locked and warded.

"Hello?" I asked, looking up.

The woman who entered the room was the Baroness Motoko Hale, lacking Penny this time. We'd had several encounters throughout the past year. She was a real person—whatever that meant—which I'd determined through judicious examination, but also someone who held many secrets. Several times she'd tried to open up to me about something but hadn't been able to.

I admitted a fondness to her despite the fact she seemed to bring out my worst impulses. Without saying as much, she'd indicated she knew about the artificial nature of this place. It had driven her to decadence that even I found questionable as well as dabbling in the occult to a far greater deal than myself.

But never the cult of Hastur.

Today, she was dressed in a woman's coat, turtleneck sweater, and dress that was fashionable yet more demure than her usual attire. Her shoes were also practical, which was as strange as me dressed up in a tuxedo.

"I see you're about to leave," the Baroness said.

"Yes," I replied, lifting my duffle bag. "You've caught me at a rather awkward time."

"Or perhaps just in time," the Baroness said. "You need to come with me."

“I’m afraid I have no more will left in me for the City’s cases,” I replied, sadly. “Someone else can investigate the headless man chasing coeds at Miskatonic Medical.”

The Baroness proceeded to drop her illusion and I found myself staring at Mercury Takahashi, looking unchanged from our last encounter. No, she looked even younger and perfected of the countless blemishes the hard living of the Wasteland inflicted. Somewhere, somehow, she’d found a portion of her immortality.

Or something worse.

“You,” I said, opening my mouth then closing it. “They said you left with another John.”

“Perhaps I did or will,” Mercury said. “Time works strangely here. You need to come with me.”

“I can’t stay here a minute longer,” I said, shaking my head. “Not even for you.”

“It’s about your daughter, Anita. She’s alive.”

Goddammit.

I could almost hear Nyarlathotep’s laughter.

Bonus Short Story

The Maltese Cthulhu

A Cthulhu Armageddon story

By C. T. Phipps

“You want me to find your missing idol,” I said, sitting behind my desk and staring at the woman from me.

I had been working as a private detective in the Dreaming City for the better part of a year now, and the realities of the business were clear. Most cases dealt with smut, broken trust, missing items, lost relatives, or suspected fraud. A not insignificant portion of them dealt with magic and the best solution in those cases was to consult a wizard or witch.

However, one element of my relationship with my clients was that it was extremely rare any of them could be described as glamorous. In a city of illusions and magic to cover up your horrific true appearance, only a few could afford to be beautiful. This woman was beautiful. Too beautiful in fact.

Standing roughly six-feet-tall in heels, she was pleasantly shaped in a way that wasn’t quite natural. I’ll spare you the private eye ogling and simply state that I was no stranger to gorgeous woman, but her appearance exceeded all but a handful. Her skin was the color of coffee, and her eyes were the most magnificent shade of black. She was wearing a red sequin dress that looked more like it was for a party than handling any sort of business in the city. Then there was her wide brimmed hat that seemed designed to make her seem more exotic and mysterious. She also had a handbag larger than a lady’s usual purse, large enough to carry a gun or wand.

“My missing Cthulhu idol, yes,” the woman said. “You can call me Marceline. Marceline de Russy.”

An obvious pseudonym.

Marceline de Russy, AKA The Medusa, was a famous Witch Queen of the Pre-Rising Earth down New Orleans way. She had been a Cthulhu cultist who had made the mistake of falling in love with a rich, bigoted man

who had ultimately murdered her before killing himself. The legend, like so many others in the city, had taken a life of its own. It was generally told as a cautionary tale about why followers of the Great Old Ones and Outer Gods should avoid marrying those who worshiped the Small Gods of Earth. Or just bigoted white men, no matter how rich.

I crossed my arms and tried to avoid looking directly at her. There was something hypnotizing about her and that wasn't always a metaphor. "You should know, Ms. de Russy, that I have not the best experience with the Cult of Cthulhu."

"It's a religion like any other," Marceline said.

"One that promises when their god rises, all of their enemies will be destroyed and they will dance on the ashes," I replied.

"So does Christianity," Marceline pointed out.

"Another religion that has tried to kill me a few times," I replied. "Most New God churches in the City consider me a demon."

"Are you?" Marceline asked.

"Demon, jinn, spirit, detective, soldier," I said, shrugging. "It's why I generally don't do religious cases."

The woman reached into her handbag, causing me to move for my pistol hidden in a holster taped under my desk. Instead, she pulled out a wallet from which she proceeded to pull out ten crisp century notes before placing them on the desk.

"I am at your disposal ma'am," I replied, dryly.

"Money is all it took?" the woman asked, questioningly.

"What have you heard about me?" I asked.

"That detective John Henry Booth is a man of honor, nobility, and willing to walk the mean streets of the City without being mean himself."

"Good." I nodded. "Then my publicist is doing his job, as I am none of those things. I am, however, quite willing to do the job for cash."

Capitalism had not been a concept I'd been intimately familiar with when I'd first come to the City. I'd swiftly adapted to the concept when it became clear that credit, paper, and coins were the driving currency (no pun intended) for determining whether a person should live or die. Indeed, I might have avoided many of the people trying to kill me if I'd been wealthy as well as alien in my nature. It seemed the rich could get by worshiping alien gods, practicing bloody atavistic magic, and consorting with unclean

things as an eccentric hobby. It was only the destitute and working class who were considered anathema.

“Good,” Marceline said. “The statue is a small, clay sculpture, about eight inches tall and depicting an image of the Great Old One’s head with a smaller portion of his body. It is several thousand years old and of great value to my family.”

“Is it magical in nature?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” Marceline said, obviously lying to me. “Its nature is purely sentimental.”

“Mmm-hmm,” I replied, deciding to take notes. I took out a pen and began writing on the crisp yellow paper on my desk, the letterhead proudly reading KING PAPER COMPANY. “Do you have any idea who might have absconded with this object?”

“I know *exactly* who has taken the idol,” Marceline said.

That was an unexpected and suspicious bit of good fortune. “And who is that?”

“The Ecstatic Order of Shub-Niggurath,” Marceline said, frowning her pretty, black lips.

“The *Ecstatic* Order?” I asked.

“It’s a sex cult,” Marceline said.

“I guessed,” I said.

Shub-Niggurath was a less popular cult than those of Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, or the New Gods, but still had a powerful following—for perhaps obvious reasons. A fertility goddess, Shub-Niggurath was usually worshiped in conjunction with Aphrodite, Bacchus, the Morrigan, Inanna, and Pan. Wild revelries were the order of the day, and it was why her religion was banned even in a city where monsters walked freely.

“They stole it from my family for their rituals,” Marceline said.

“And you want me to steal it back,” I replied, finally getting down to brass tacks.

“Yes,” Marceline said, not denying it or engaging in euphemism. I appreciated that. “There will be an even greater reward for you once you bring it back.”

“More money?” I asked.

“Ten times as much,” Marceline said, positively slinking over to me. It was not so much alluring as a predatory movement of her body. “And still greater rewards.”

Like a snake.

She pressed herself forward, putting her face-to-face with me, before kissing me on the lips. My mind grew somewhat foggy.

“I see,” I said, trying but failing to pull away.

“Until next time,” Marceline said, departing and leaving me tingling all over.

Oh yeah, she was going to betray me.

Tracking down the Ecstatic Cult of Shub-Niggurath proved easier than expected.

“It’s a goddamn sorority?” I asked, staring at the pleasant Victorian building across the well-manicured green lawn.

It was a two-story structure sitting in a row of a dozen other structures that formed their own city block. Only the very rich and very gifted could attend college in the City, but that didn’t prevent people from creating their own little secret societies to help guarantee their futures once past graduation. Notably, the building had iron bars on its windows, behind which were thick curtains. There was also a large stone wall around the place and several wards possessing real magic to them.

In retrospect, I shouldn’t have been surprised. A wise but cynical man once said that cults were what big religions called the little ones. The truth was a bit more complicated. A cult was, at heart, about secrecy. A religion supposedly was open about its doctrine and truths that it was it supposed to share with everyone. A cult, by contrast, was meant to keep its higher truths to devotees that proved themselves worthy of such power.

When magic was involved, inevitably cults formed around the power that its leadership was reluctant to share. Wizards and witches were a surly and jealous lot that always wished to expand their knowledge but were reluctant to share it. Apprenticeships were like slavery, and it was the rare conjurer who would let his student learn as much as himself. It was why colleges like New Miskatonic were gathering places for the arcane as a college was meant to share everything, even when it was perhaps better that such truths be kept hidden. Who knew how many secret societies and would-be magicians had found their footing in New Miskatonic’s occult library? Many, I’d wager.

“I mean, it certainly fills some men’s fantasies,” Jackie said, staring at the sign. The muscular redheaded woman was only a bit shorter than me. She was also dressed in a trench coat and fedora that was more men’s fashion in the City. Her glamour was slipping a bit today and her teeth were unusually sharp with prominent dog-like canines as befitting a ghoul-human hybrid. Still, she could look like a twenty-year-old and someone who could fit in among these upper-class twits. I admitted, I’d expected to find the cult a bit further afield, though.

“Please don’t make jokes,” I muttered, having raised Jackie since she was an adolescent and not able to deal with the fact she was an adult. Arguably centuries older and looking no older than twenty-eight.

“A good chunk of them are New Miskatonic U cheerleaders, too!” Jackie said, giving me an elbow nudge. “Go Squids.”

I stared at her. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I never joke for the twenty-five bucks an hour you pay me,” Jackie replied. “Two of the ladies here, the Crampton Sisters, are the minds behind the Ecstatic Order. They recruit over the city’s internet and host raves throughout the city that include many after-parties where the drugs and sex flow freely.”

“Fascinating,” I said, dryly. “The internet is the telephone service that sends pictures and written messages, right?”

Jackie sighed. “We’re never going to get you caught up, are we?”

“I don’t believe in Yithian science,” I said.

Jackie sighed. “You’re hopeless, Dad.”

“Well now I just have to figure out how to get inside,” I muttered. “If they’ve got the Horror in clay then they’re probably keeping it in their sacred place—so to speak.”

“Yeah,” Jackie said. “Are you sure this client is on the level?”

I struggled to throw off thoughts of Marceline. The kiss she’d planted on me had put me under some sort of spell and, worse yet, I knew it. She was an extremely attractive woman, but she hadn’t needed to put some sort of geas or curse on me to get me to bring back her idol. I would have done it for the money alone.

Unfortunately, the aftereffects were leaving my blood on fire and thoughts constantly drifting back to the witch. I wanted to bring the statue to her, and I could tell that unnatural hunger was imposed on me. I also knew that there was no way it would be a simple transaction and that

anyone who used that kind of power on another to control them was someone who intended only to end it in blood.

“John?” Jackie asked, sensing my discomfort.

“No,” I answered her earlier question. “She is not. Did you pick up any dangers?”

“You mean are they actually just a pair of party girls, or are they genuinely dangerous?” Jackie asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I don’t know.” Jackie frowned. “It seems like there are easier ways to justify college hedonism than invoking forces mankind does not understand. There are rumors.”

“There are always rumors,” I said.

“And some of them are even true,” Jackie said, slyly. “However, unfortunately, these rumors also come with missing persons reports. Never students of New Miskatonic University but other invitees, poorer and not supposed to be there in the first place. Maybe it’s unrelated. Maybe they just ODed.”

“Or maybe they’re paying a tithe for their pleasures,” I said, grunting. “Real magic always has a price.”

“And the trick is getting other people to pay it,” Jackie said. “The magic in the walls says that at someone inside this place knows the real deal, though. The cult is only starting out but its eager to expand its knowledge base.”

That gave me an idea.

Laying the breadcrumbs out had only taken a few days, but worked like a charm among the more credulous of the city’s supernatural enthusiasts. Jackie had created a false profile on the internet for me of a reputed book seller and former student at Miskatonic with a master’s degree in alternative religion.

“Mr. Henri de Marigny” had apparently run into some financial difficulties and was now willing to part with his occult library of originals as well as the translations he’d done. Fragments of the *Necronomicon, Book of Eibon*, *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, and so on.

This was already a big warning sign for any serious occult collectors because true practitioner would sell their copies. If you had access to such a treasure trove, you'd rob and kill or make deals before parting with them. It was enough to appeal to amateurs, though, and that was what I was hoping the so-called Crampton Sisters were. We'd received hundreds of inquiries over the next few days. Then our fishes had taken the bait, if you don't mind some Innsmouthtown slang.

"We're so glad to see you, Mr. de Marigny," Babs Crampton said, answering the door in a Miskatonic U sweater and knee length skirt.

Babs was a beautiful blonde-haired girl with a headband and girl next door looks that nevertheless smoldered with an understated sensuality I couldn't entirely disregard as lingering effects of Marceline's spell. It had been three days and I was still suffering from the effects of it.

"Thank you, madame," I said, effecting an upper crust City accent. "I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. Is your sister here?"

Disguise wasn't my forte, but it was amazing how a pair of glasses, a change of clothes, and an adjustment to one's demeanor can alter one's entire position in society. In this case, I'd put on a jacket with brown elbow patches, beige pants, and almost slipper-like dress shoes to distract from my bulky, muscular form.

"Oh yes," Babs said, cheerfully and opening the door to reveal the second of the Crampton sisters.

Raquel Crampton was the opposite of her sister with barely any resemblance between the two, having tanned skin and pretty, orange hair, and wearing a lime green jacket. She looked like she'd just stepped in from the rain despite it having been bone dry for several days. Both she and her sister, together, looked like actresses playing college students as opposed to college students themselves.

"I've heard so much about you!" Raquel said, cheerfully. Which was quite impossible given I was a fictious construct that hadn't existed a week ago.

"You flatter me, madame," I said, smiling as I held tightly to my briefcase. "Will we be alone this meeting?"

"Why, are we not enough?" Raquel asked, her innuendo-laced joke strangely lacking in sexuality.

"Our sisters are away," Babs said, quickly. "This is a private matter for the leadership of our coven."

“Coven, eh?” I asked, politely.

Babs moved to the side, allowing me to pass. “Oh yes, We teach in the Ecstatic Order of Shub-Niggurath that the word witch is actually a word for the wise. We seek to appropriate it from the patriarchal, oppressive, religious forces of Yog-Sothoth and Hasturian religious structures. Ones that accent the male idiom over the feminine. Don’t you agree?”

I was of the opinion that the Great Old Ones did not remotely give a shit about humanity, let alone our genders that probably didn’t coordinate to anything their species possessed. I also felt it ridiculous to worship beings that considered us equivalent to termites on a good day, but that wasn’t going to help my position.

“That sounds fascinating, though I admit I am here primarily to discuss our business arrangement. I want my library to find a good home and that requires a face-to-face meeting to hash out our details.”

I walked past the sisters and found myself in a stately looking study with a set of winding stairs leading to the second floor, and walls full of books, mostly lesser volumes of the occult mixed in with a variety of cheap romance novels for strange contrast. The place had a lot of light coming in from the windows and well-appointed antique—or excellent reproductions of antiques—furniture.

They’d gone to some elaborate lengths to make themselves appear respectable and it was entirely possible they were, at least by City standards. None of that could hide a darker cast to everything, though, as my honed senses detected something unholy beneath me. I could sense a terrible power thrumming underneath the floorboards and guessed something or someone was gathering mystical forces for some nefarious purpose. It always was nefarious with magic. Call me premature but I’d have bet my PI’s license that was where the Cthulhu idol was.

“Of course, Mr. de Marigny,” Raquel said. “We just thought you might like to acquaint yourself with the intimacies of our religion since you’re someone who is going to help us so greatly—profit motivation or not. Would you care for a drink?”

I smiled. “I don’t drink. Deadens the mind.”

How stupid did they think I was?

So, I was an abject moron.

I was presently tied with ropes around my wrists against a Saint Andrew's cross in the middle of the sorority's basement, a large green balefire burning in the center of the chamber. The walls were covered in a noxious smelling pinkish fungi and smeared with other more identifiable fluids. Both the walls and fire seemed to be feeding strange artery-like vines that crisscrossed the floors, walls, and ceiling.

There was a general sense that the building's foundation was alive, and the foundations had been dug out to allow the unnatural meat-plant growing around me to live. Worse—at least for my peace of mind—were countless animal bones and more human-like ones scattered among the bizarre underground garden. There were a few fresher bodies that looked like they'd been drained of blood, with large, circular, sucker-like wounds on their sides.

How I'd managed to enter this unfortunate situation when I was so cagey and determined to keep the upper hand over the Crampton Sisters is a fascinating story. However, I'm not going to tell it because it makes me look bad and you'll just have to use your imagination. Let's pretend it was something semi-dignified like knocking me over the head with the Cthulhu idol when I wasn't looking.

The Crampton sisters proceeded to move into the chamber, both wearing extraordinarily revealing attire whose sexualized effect was somewhat blunted by the fact they were now hairless, nose-less serpent-women. Their bodies were covered in thick scales, and they had eyes of the most malign yellow, and long tails sticking out from the lowest point of their backs. Which, technically, I suppose made them resemble lizards more than serpents, but taxonomy wasn't my strong suit.

Babs Crampton—I was taking a wild guess as to which sister was which—was holding a purple pillow bearing the Cthulhu idol. It was very different from the way Marceline described it as instead of clay, it was constructed of R'lyehian gold. Perhaps it had been covered in clay and the Crampton Sisters had cleaned it off. Raquel was carrying a large sword with a serrated blade that had a carving of a snake along its side. That was not a good sign.

"You sought to steal from us, Mr. Booth," Babs Crampton said, her voice now carrying the inhuman throaty rasp of a serpent woman. "The idol to Great Cthulhu is something that is ours by right of conquest."

“Marceline de Russy disagrees,” I replied, working against my bonds as I tested both the wood and rope. The rope was strong, but the wood of the cross was old and probably bought for purposes other than bondage—at least of human sacrifices.

“Ha!” Babs sneered. “You don’t even know her real name.”

“No, I admit I do not,” I said, wondering if I had any magic that might aid me down here. I was a hedge wizard and the cost of even the lightest spell was one paid in blood or souls—if such a thing existed—and I was always hesitant to open my mind up to those terrible cosmic forces.

Once there had been a time I could have just torn through the creatures like wet tissue paper, ripping flesh and bone like they were nothing. I had been a creature that could have been worshiped by foolish mortals. I’d traded it for my humanity and some days—like right now for instance—I wondered if I’d gotten the better part of the deal. Instead, I focused my strength on one spot and hoped I’d be able to be able to break the center of the cross.

“We were her apprentices,” Babs said, pacing the statue at my feet. “She opened our minds up to the true nature of the cosmos but refused to give us real power. So, we took what was ours!’

“Uh huh,” I said, staring at her. “Was this before or after you became snake women?”

Raquel hissed at me, actually hissed. It was *ridiculous.*

“You will die, Mr. Booth, and your seed as well as blood will be offered up to Shub-Niggurath,” Babs said. “The Mother of All and Nothing shall feast upon you, and we shall drink of her ichor.”

I was less than impressed with their pulp magazine villainy and wondered how much their evil witch act was how society had educated them that evil priestesses were supposed to act. This was strictly amateur hour sorcery and they’d obviously ditched Marceline—if she was the real deal—well before they’d learned anything useful.

“The seed giving part wasn’t so bad, but I’ve had better,” I replied, referring to how they had gotten me here. “At least now that the beer goggles are off.”

Raquel lifted her sword and shouted. “*Ia Shub-Niggurath! Yig-Seth! Bla’ata’al mack!*”

Raquel was close enough that my recklessness had a small chance of success. Forcing even every bit of strength into my limbs, I snapped the

Saint Andrew's cross in half at my back and maneuvered my body so that the sword buried itself into the wooden beam binding my right arm. Striking it, the area gave way to free my upper arms and I grabbed Raquel before lifting her in the air.

"Ahhh!" Raquel shouted. "What are you—"

Raquel was cut off by my hurling her into the balefire behind her. What followed was a nightmarish scream accompanied by alien and not so alien obscenities. The flames licked at the serpent woman, and she thrashed in its magical light, the alien forces inside the fire tearing at whatever spells she'd cast upon herself to make her immortal. Raquel reached out to her sister, calling in some ancient tongue to be rescued.

"I can't!" Babs shouted, horrified by her sister's burning. Looking as if she wanted to go into the fire or work some magic to save her, she instead grabbed the Cthulhu idol on the ground before rushing to the door at the other end of the makeshift temple.

"Bitch!" Raquel's final word was entirely understandable. The burning serpent woman then exploded and became a flying spectral will-o-wisp that bolted out of the balefire and rushed through the doorway past Babs. It reminded me of something out of a fantasy barbarian story. The remaining Crampton sister was thrown to the ground and the Cthulhu idol skipped across the ground away from her.

My legs were still bound to the Saint Andrew's cross' remains and that part of the object was bolted to the ground. Reaching down to grab the late Raquel's sword, I started cutting myself free. The sword was incredibly sharp and freeing myself was fast but not quite fast enough. Because I noticed the room was *moving*.

The vines on the ground and wall detached themselves, revealing lamprey-like suckers that made disgusting noises as they began to descend upon me. A large, tumorous, fleshy growth descended from the center of the roof, revealing the evil heart of the creature the Crampton Sisters had cultivated here.

"The Great Mother's Daughter shall devour you!" Babs shouted, raising the idol in the air. "Feed, mighty one! Feed!"

I finished cutting myself free and slashed my way through the vines as they came for me, spilling a noxious ichor where each was struck. Running toward Babs, I gave her a punch to the jaw that was perhaps not my most chivalrous action, but still managed to achieve what I was hoping for:

knocking her flat on her tail. Grabbing the Cthulhu idol from her arms, I made a break for the door as I left the sword clattering on the ground.

“You will never be able to outrun the Great Mother!” Babs shouted at me as I started up the stairs.

“I only have to outrun you!” I shouted back, a quick glance having confirmed the vines in the basement were starting to wrap themselves around their former master.

I tried not to listen to the sounds I heard as I reached the first floor. They were infinitely worse than screams.

I grew sicker and weaker with the passing of the days. Within two days, I had lost twenty pounds and every moment I was covered in sweat from a fever that seemed always on the verge of taking my life. I also found myself carrying the Cthulhu idol wherever I went, unable or unwilling to let it leave my sight save with the strongest of efforts.

Marceline’s spell was more clearly something designed to kill me unless I returned to her the property she thought was rightfully hers. It was bad client manners and yet I had to admit I only cared that she undid the magic when I finally arranged for the meeting at the docks near midnight.

I, of course, didn’t believe for a second that she intended to remove the curse once I’d delivered her property, though. One thing I’d learned about wizards over the years that had held true with virtually each I’d met was this: they were all assholes.

I was standing on the edge of pier 13, holding a large package wrapped in brown paper with a little wax covered rope around it. I was once more dressed in my trench coat and fedora, glad to have a set of clothes again even if covering the cost of my lost suit from the guys I’d rented it from would be an enormous pain the budget. I was armed but I didn’t think that would make a large amount of difference with Marceline.

Not if she saw it coming.

“I’m glad to see you’re a man of your word,” Marceline’s voice filled the night air, just a few strokes after midnight. She’d changed from her flamboyant red dress to a blue trench coat that was complimented by a similar blue hat.

“You promised me ten grand,” I replied, now shaking with the pain of her presence. I wanted to throw myself on the ground, present the Cthulhu idol to her, and offer my life up for sacrifice. It was behavior so out of character that I wanted to put a bullet through my brain just to make sure I died as myself.

“I’m afraid that part of our deal is cancelled,” Marceline spoke, stretching out her hands. “Give me the idol.”

Her voice had a compelling, almost hypnotic quality. “Not until you fix whatever you’ve done to me.”

Marceline’s eyes narrowed and she repeated herself. The power behind her words became all-encompassing. “*Give me the idol*.”

Instead, I unwrapped package and revealed the Cthulhu idol. It had a grenade wrapped in duct tape around its side. I pulled out the pin and squeezed the safety lever. “I’ll happily give you the idol. But unless I’m cured, I guess we’ll be finding out if it’s explosive proof.”

Marceline stared at me.

“Impressive, Booth,” Marceline said, her voice sounding familiar in that moment. However, I couldn’t quite place it.

“It seems you haven’t lost all of your Wasteland cunning in your time play-acting as a detective.”

“Make your choice,” I said, struggling for breath. “My hands are really shaky.”

Marceline waved her hand over me. “May the dark gods cease feasting on your soul.”

I fell to my knees, a sudden sense of relief filling my body. “Thanks.”

“Give me the idol,” Marceline said, slowly walking forward. “Put the pin—”

Of course, I obeyed her command this time and threw the idol into her arms. Marceline began screaming several commands in a guttural inhuman language before I drew my gun and put three rounds into her head. Her body collapsed into a bunch of writhing snakes that fled into the water beneath the pier. I wasted a few bullets, blowing up as many as I could before they disappeared. I got maybe half in the end, leaving bloody snake parts and bullet holes all over the wooden pier’s planks.

Jackie, my backup, ran up to me with a shotgun in hand. “Did you get her?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted.

Jackie looked down at the Cthulhu idol and pulled out the wooden grenade I'd carved and painted with shoe polish. "Glad she fell for the bluff."

"I wish I could have acquired the real deal," I muttered. "No matter, I suggest we take this thing down to the nearest foundry and smelt it."

"That'll really piss her off," Jackie muttered.

"I got the impression she already hated me," I muttered. "But hopefully she'll take time to recover."

"Ex-girlfriend?" Jackie joked.

It wasn't funny to me. "To be honest, for a second there, she sounded a lot like my ex-slave master. Katryn. Does no one stay dead anymore?"

I looked down at the Cthulhu idol, whose four ruby encrusted eyes twinkled back with the glow of an alien power that would hopefully fade once it was melted down. A part of me considered keeping it, but I knew it would just make me a target for every two-bit magician and wannabe sorcerer in the City. I had enough enemies as it was.

"He's not the one to ask," Jackie said, joking. "He's not dead, only sleeping."

"Yeah, and this world is the stuff dreams are made of."

Afterword

By Matt Davenport, author of the Andrew Doran series

I cannot tell you when I "met" C. T. Phipps. Not exactly, although I remember how it happened. It was in two parts, and I don't remember which came first. That's the problem with age and memory, like dreams of an unfathomable god, they can shift, fade, and become something entirely different. On both occasions, I reached out to him for aid of a kind.

The thing to know about Phipps is that he always wants to help people get their words into the stratosphere. In one of our first conversations, my brother and I had just released our superhero book, *Broken Nights*, and we had no idea how to get it off the ground and in front of the readers we wanted. It was a superhero novel, and I had just finished reading *The Rules of Supervillainy* by the man in question. So I did what anybody who was overly gregarious and knee-deep in a sales career would do, I Tweeted him directly asking if he had any suggestions on how to market my book. He was not the only author that I Tweeted or emailed. I won't call out the other authors, but I will say that out of the ten or more people I attempted to communicate with, C. T. Phipps was the only one who responded.

Imagine mine and my brother's surprise when this foreign element, on par to us with Neil Gaiman or Deborah Harkness, reached down from the clouds of author bliss and readily provided every single bit of help requested of him.

The other instance that my brain has fogged over the timestamp of was on par with this first interaction with the fast-fingered typist. I was looking for someone to critique my Lovecraftian novel, *The Trials of Obed Marsh*. Again, he never hesitated, leaping to the front of the line like some sort of Randolph Carter being told that he was only steps away from Ulthar.

That's the thing about Phipps. He always puts other authors on the same level as himself, even if those authors think he's worlds above them. So, when I was given the chance to say something at the end of *Tree of Azathoth*, I was not going to let my guy down.

Azathoth is what happens when you mix the Christian idea of God with the popularized idea of Simulation Theory. In the mythos, you are bombarded with sleeping gods all lost in their dreams and waiting for the

time to awaken. In those same stories, those dreams by those alien deities penetrate the minds of mortal beings and tear them asunder. We are left with the tattered remains of what could have been a great hero but has been turned into a gibbering mess.

Azathoth's dreams are bigger.

Azathoth's dreams *are*.

While those other beings are dreaming up some madness for us simple folk, Azathoth is dreaming up all of what we know of as reality. Your very existence is as a subconscious element in an alien's indecipherable dream montage. Cthulhu dreams and we go mad, but if Azathoth awakens, we cease to exist. Now, that is trippy, but it is also so much fun to play around with. Especially, for someone like Phipps.

Another thing to know about Phipps is that he is a master at doing his homework. I won't name any names (cough-ME-cough), but some authors, even those well-versed in the mythos, do their research as more of a last-minute kind of thing. They rely on memory and a well-worn *Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia* that sits on the edge of their desk with a coffee stain on the cover (I assume…).

C. T. Phipps might do something similar, but somehow, he manages to bring a level of depth to his work that reads like a graduate of Miskatonic University, itself. His subtle references, tying in obscure peripheral works along with the standard mythos references that even the earlier, unnamed author could have picked up give stories, like the entire *Cthulhu Armageddon* series, layers of complexity that make it enjoyable by people new to Lovecraft and those steeped in every detail of the lore. He writes for everyone in a niche genre that can seem intimidating to some.

John Booth's adventures are a trip into the insanity of a Phipps-generated Lovecraft story. You have the protagonist that, much like Phipps himself, wants to help others but is hindered by something that Phipps isn't, and that's that everyone he is trying to help is a monster of some kind. Some of them he collects into a team that scours the wastelands looking for ways to assist other monsters and the remnants of humanity. Just as many of us Mythos (and superhero/cyberpunk/urban fantasy/science fiction) writers would not have networked with each other if not for the connective tissue that is Phipps, Booth has built a team to help him do his good works and carve something greater out of his niche of the Wastelands.

This new book (that I got to read before any of you, so HA! I win!), takes everything set before it and does a very Azathoth thing. Perhaps a very Phipps thing as well. Much as a long dream can shift into new realities and changes in what we know to be true, Phipps takes us twenty years after the second book to show us how a world entirely dominated by everything Lovecraft can be shaken like an Etch-A-Sketch into an entirely new image, all kicked into existence by Booth's longing for his companions as well as the referenced Tree of Azathoth.

The *Cthulhu Armageddon* series is about fighting and accepting change as much as it is about Booth and the survivors of the human species. With this new, shook up, world for Booth, we also get something that Phipps had yet to do in a Lovecraft story, and that's a touch on the classic pulp adventure style of Lovecraft's contemporaries which also allows for people familiar with the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game to feel more at home in Booth's apocalypse.

When we dive into the works of Phipps, we see some common themes in that he loves to world build, take his characters through painful arcs, and is not afraid of completely altering the fabric of the book's reality if it means giving his character a new challenge. Tearing down the theater to create a better movie sounds like a dangerous approach to writing, but it not only works with Booth, it kind of *has* to work with Booth.

At this point, and after everything he's lost, what else does he even have left? His world must be shaken up if Booth is to have any hope of a future where he isn't constantly tortured. We keep reading to see him gain hope. The stories continue to show us how that hope can be torn away from him. Of course, the moment he reaches that blissful moment, the story will end. So, here we are, hoping to see how Phipps tortures Booth this time.

The tree in the title of this book seems to be a deity made from man's intervention, but it reads to me as something that man made to interface with the dreaming god. A conduit of flesh from our reality that reaches into something bigger. How would that look from inside your own head? Would you notice if one of the things you dreamt up started building a way to understand the rest of the dreams in your mind? And if you did notice, would you wake up?

It is that kind of complete brain-twister of horror that makes me excited whenever Phipps has a new title coming out, and even more so to shoot ideas back and forth with him. Together, Phipps and I, along with several

others (waving at a bunch of people named David), have done a handful of "connected" anthologies.

These are books with brought to you by a modern Lovecraftian Circle of authors, all of whom were brought together, or networked, by Phipps. Authors like David Hambling (Harry Stubbs, *The War of the God Queen*), David Niall Wilson (*The Call of Distant Shores*), and David J. West (*Cowboys and Cthulhu*). Each of these titles, on top of his other prolific works, includes at least two stories from Phipps with at least one being a *Cthulhu Armageddon* tale. No matter what adventure in whatever genre is tugging at him, Phipps is never too far from his friend and ally, John Booth.

As prolific as Charles is, it is his engagement with his audience, his networking with his contemporaries, and his depth of understanding of the source material that makes me think he would have been welcomed into the Lovecraft Circle of authors back in the day. Or, perhaps that's not fair to Phipps. He somehow manages to put out full-length novels at a pace that most cannot even fathom, while still doing the same level of networking, audience discussions, and research (or more so) than even Howard Philips did.

Our real-life Booth does all of this without breaking a sweat and keeps us, his fans, and his friends steering clear of the hazards but getting close enough to see what absolute horrors are on its shores and to smell the colossal nightmares deep in its sands.

Madness without the debilitating side-effects courtesy of our captain, C. T. Phipps.

Glossary

H.P. Lovecraft created a vast array of strange and unusual creatures as well as places for his world. These were expanded on and added to by many authors over the years. However, they can also be extremely confusing or weird. Which was the point. I've gathered here a list of definitions for many of them in hopes that some readers will be able to have an easier time navigating the Dreaming City.

Al-Azif: A book of magic that was used to create the *Necronomicon*.

Abdul al-Hazred: An early sorcerer and occultist from the 7th century. He wrote the *Necronomicon* and founded one of the early cults of the Great Old Ones. He was mysteriously killed by alien forces in a crowded bazaar.

Arkham: A large city formerly in Massachusetts. It was destroyed by the Rising.

Avatar: A manifestation of a fragment of a Great Old One or other higher beings consciousness. If summoned via magic, they are often less like the gods themselves but a combination of them with whatever the summoning thinks they're like.

Azathoth: The supreme god of the universe. It is a barely intelligent primordial force that creates and destroys at will. It is served and controlled by Nyarlathotep.

The Black Cathedral: An ancient Elder Thing structure taken over by Alan Ward and turned into the headquarters for the Cult of Cthulhu.

The Black Soldier: A Wasteland scare legend of a ghostly warrior that wanders the desert to collect the souls of warriors slain in battle. It is a face of Nyarlathotep.

Carcosa: A planet or possibly entire dimension with the Dreamlands (or accessible by it). It is a land of fairy tales, art, and sorcery ruled by

worshipers of Hastur. The Plateau of Leng and Kingdom of Hali are sometimes associated with.

Cat: The race from Earth that is furry and sociopathic but adorable. They are intelligent and capable of speech in the Dreamlands.

Cats from Saturn: A race of cats that are capable of shapechanging, size-changing, and other magic. They live in a dream of Saturn from a long-dead Roman that they stabilized with their power.

Celephais: The sister city of the Dreaming City, known as the Shining City, it has an almost identical origin. The product of the dreamer Kuranes' powerful imagination, it was crafted by his immense will. A native Englishman, he created the city to reflect his initial dreams of idealized medieval fantasy kingdom, but it gradually came to resemble Modern England as he grew to miss it. It has since grown into an empire.

The City: Also known as the Dreaming City. It is a massive island of sanity in the madness of the Dreamland created by Randolph Carter and later expanded by millions of other dreamers from the now-dead Earth. It resembles a weird hybrid of New York, Los Angeles, Arkham, and other dead human cities.

The Color: One of a race of vampiric energy clouds that travel through space, absorbing life and reproducing. They are vulnerable to radiation and being trapped between in physical substances. They are the people of the Unimaginable Horror and its spawn that it spread throughout the universe.

The Council: The leadership of the Dreaming City based on the Council of Leaders from New Arkham. It replaced the former City Elders.

Cult of Cthulhu: A once vast cult of worshipers that previously spanned the world. Despite their god rising and ignoring them, the cult continues to exist in the City.

Cthulhu: The most infamous and powerful of the Great Old Ones. He appears as a mile-tall tentacled squid-dragon-humanoid. He is the Lord of R'lyeh and the High Priest of Azathoth. He is the first of his kind and lord of the Cthulhuoid race.

Cthulhuoid: Lesser members of Cthulhu's race that are giants and psychic beings of great power.

Dagon: The least of the Great Old Ones and a servant of Cthulhu. Supposedly slain by Alan Ward. It is still worshiped by Deep Ones despite not answering their prayers for millennia.

Deep Ones: A race of aquatic humanoids that lived alongside humanity beneath the waves for millennia. They worship Dagon, Mother Hydra, and Cthulhu. They are accepted as a demihuman race in the City.

Demihumans: The polite term for the human offshoots like Deep Ones, ghouls, Faceless Ones, and other species that can still breed with mankind as well as produce viable offspring.

Dreamer: A human, cat, ghoul, or other being capable of altering the nature of reality in the Dreamlands. This is the basis of magic and far easier in the Dreamlands than in the former physical world.

The Dreaming City: See *The City*.

The Dreaming King: A legendary figure who altered the Dreaming City from its original subdued state to its massive current size. Believed by many to be Randolph Carter.

The Dreamlands: A dimension where thought becomes reality. It exists alongside physical reality and where the gods of the universe are born.

The Dream-Quest of Randolph Carter: A movie made by Gabriel Booth to tell the story of the City's founder. It is largely accurate except for the

insertion of a love interest and portraying Carter as a two-fisted action hero over the horror-obsessed scholar he was.

The Dunwych: A tribal people of multiple cultures mixed together after the Rising. They are well-adapted to the Wasteland and are users of technology.

Elder Gods: Powerful dreaming entities that embody the dreams of humanity of divine beings. These include the Small Gods of Earth and benevolent interpretations of Great Old Ones as well as Other Gods.

Elder Things: A race of tentacled, stalk-like aliens that once ruled the Earth. They created the shoggoths and uplifted humanity from apes. They are a race of scientists and slavers that were enemies of the Great Old Ones.

Elder Sign: A star-like symbol that provides protection against the lesser species of the Other Gods. It has no effect on baseline humans, Kastro'vaal, Great Race of Yith, or the Elder Things. It is believed to have been created by either the Elder Gods or the Elder Things to battle the Great Old Ones.

The Empty House: A pocket universe created as the personal domain of Gabriel Booth upon his transformation. It appears as a large house or small mansion that is infinite in size. It is quite comfortable but isolated from time as well as any visitors. It is located in Carcosa, Hali, and Leng simultaneously. Gabriel briefly considered evacuating the Old Universe's survivors here.

Esoteric East: A nickname for the New England Wasteland due to its frontier-like environments.

Eyes of Yog-Sothoth: See *Kastro'vaal*.

Faceless Ones: A race of men without faces who live underground and wield vast knowledge regarding science as well as sorcery. Possibly related to the K'nyanians, only mutated much worse. They have mouths on their hands.

Familiar: An animal or lesser being containing a summoned spirit or consciousness that is bound to a witch or wizard’s will. They are usually intelligent and powerful in their own right. Lesser willed wizards frequently become dominated by their pets.

Ghouls: A race of canine humanoids that can appear as human beings as well as breed with them. They primarily live underground, possess advanced technology, and eat copious amounts of meat. Significantly friendlier to humanity than most species.

Gods: A title given by mankind to various powerful entities.

Great Old Ones: Massive immortal psychic entities that are the apex of the universe's beings, uplifted by Nyarlathotep to embody their species' development. Earth has a higher number that normal with perhaps a one hundred or more.

Great Race of Yith: A race of conical aliens that are psychically capable of possessing others as well as traveling through time. Unlike most species, they are relatively friendly to humankind, if condescending.

Hali: A Medieval-esque kingdom in the Dreamlands where all fairy tales, nightmares, and sorceries are true. It is associated with Hali and Carcosa. There is supposedly a vast lake within it that can bring life to all wishes and desires as well as contains its own Great Old One.

Hastur: The King in Yellow and the Lord of Decay. Hastur appears as a humanoid alien hidden by a yellow cloak among other avatars. A Great Old One, he is worshiped by a vast cult of wizards as well as artists, fungal, shepherds, and undead beings. Like all his kind, he is utterly inscrutable to mankind.

Hyborian Age: A period of human civilization taking place roughly 20,000 to 13,000 years ago that contained Bronze to Medieval levels of technology as well as far greater amounts of magic.

Ilek-Vad: A city taken over by Randolph Carter, who ruled it as a king for a time. It has many stereotypical elements of a fantasy kingdom and dates back to the Hyborian Age. It has since modernized to an extent and is a chief trading partner of the City.

Kadath: A vast mountaintop castle fortress where the Small Gods of Earth live and breed with their human slaves. It is the inspiration for Olympus, Shamballah, and Elysium according to scholars.

Kastro'vaal: As close as human pronunciation can come to the true name of the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth. They are a race of time and space traveling aliens that exist outside of reality. They are shapechangers that can assume the form of other races and even breed with them. Their default appearance varied tremendously but can be described as “armored slime with a central humanoid body.”

The King in Yellow: Another movie by Gabriel Booth that was never completed. It is based on an infamous play considered blasphemous, cursed, lewd, and terrifying in equal respects.

Kithnid: A being believed to be Cthulhu's equal and opposite by some Elder God worshipers, but others worship him as a benevolent version of the Great Old One himself. It supposedly lives on the top of Kadath rather than in R’lyeh. The *Re’Kithnid* postulates him as the supreme good of the universe and prophet of Yog-Sothoth opposed by a Satanic Azathoth-worshiping Cthulhu.

Knights of Arkham: A human supremacist hate group that venerates the Great Old Ones, Outer Gods, and practices magic while teaching utter nonsense. The organization also favors certain groups of humans it deems purebloods over others based on discredited racial science. Its religion is just an excuse to accumulate as much power as possible while manipulating the masses.

Leng: A vast plateau in the Dreamlands where the Empire of Leng exists. Its population are believed to be survivors of another human-populated

universe destroyed by the Great Old Ones.

Men of Leng: A demihuman species that dwell on the Plateau of Leng where their vast empire exists. They are trading partners with the City and many other communities but find the city's anti-slaving laws deeply frustrating. They appear as satyrs and succubi with many inhuman elements like furry legs, hooves, horns, and wings.

Mi-Go: The Fungi from Yuggoth are a psychic, space-dwelling race that exists in the asteroid belt around the Sol system. They are not natives to this region but have since immigrated to live among its residents. They employ human brains in various robotic devices, including human-like androids. The race still exists in the Dreamlands despite its universe being destroyed.

Miskatonic University: A Pre-Rising Ivy League school with a focus on the occult and metaphysics. A university named in its honor has been constructed in the City.

Moon-Beasts: A race that has oppressed and conquered the people of Leng. They communicate with flutes but are otherwise silent and eat human or demihuman species. John speculates they are a degenerate subspecies of Elder Things, but that may be his prejudices regarding both.

Mother Hydra: Another Great Old One of the Deep Ones' race that is worshiped as their supreme deity now that Dagon is dead. She is a fertility goddess and bears some similarity to Shub-Niggurath.

The Necronomicon: The book written by Abdul al-Hazred. It is a fairly accurate description of the history of the world and the creation of the Great Old Ones and their inevitable rise to destroy the world. It contains numerous magical rituals and true names of deities but is not primarily a book of sorcery. See the *Al-Azif*.

New Arkham: A city built on the remains of a United States Air Force base nearby the original city of Arkham, Massachusetts. It was destroyed by a

Cthulhuoid entity, and its survivors fled to Kingsport then the Dreaming City. The population was both fascist and xenophobic.

New Ulthar: A small, cat-ridden, frontier cattle town that seems obliviousness to the horrors around it. John settled there with Mercury for the better part of two decades.

Nyarlathotep: The Other Gods' messenger. A being that has an infinite number of faces and avatars across all the cosmos, it is capable of dealing with other beings on their own level no matter how small or insignificant. It is the guardian of gods and transcendence, no matter how foul or terrifying.

Old Universe: John's reality (termed Universe-2821 by the Great Race of Yith and the Mi-Go). Yog-Sothoth has effectively consumed the entirety of it and its survivors have since fled to the Dreamlands or other realities.

Other Gods: Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, and Yog-Sothoth. The true gods of existence.

Psychic: Humans carrying the genes modified by the Elder Things that allow them to will their dreams into reality. Psychics are much more common in the aftermath of the Rising. All sorcerers possess this quality to some extent.

Prophecies of the Rat God: A book written by Hastur-worshiping ghouls during the Black Death that spoke of it as a divine punishment from Zum-Trivalis. It speaks of the destruction of the world and humanity fleeing to a world of Dreams. The rites of the religion are deeply sexual and cannibalistic.

Randolph Carter: A writer of weird fiction and occult investigator from Earth in the 1920s. The descendant of wizards, he refused to turn back from his studies despite the death of his best friend and became a powerful dreamer. After a failed quest to contact the Small Gods of Earth, he eventually sought ultimate enlightenment from Yog-Sothoth. This resulted in his tragic fusion with the alien wizard Zkauba. Randolph Carter created

the basis of the Dreaming City during his quest and is believed by many to be the Dreaming King.

Rangers: United States Remnant Special Forces trained in Wasteland survival as well as the destruction of alien entities. They have both an impressive kill ratio as well as high casualty rate.

Reanimated: Human corpses reanimated by either alchemy, magic, or science. Also known as West Boys due to the misuse of Herbert West's failed reanimation formula by the United States Remnant.

Re'Kithnid: The name of a book written by the mad nun Brianna Lethder in the 14th century, combining Egyptian mythology she could not possibly have known about with stories of the Elder Gods and Medieval Christianity. It demonizes Cthulhu, Hastur, and Shub-Nigurrath as demons while stating they are all elementally related. The book was banned by the Catholic church but spread via copies created by monks.

The Republic of Carter: The proper name for the country that the City technically consists of. Most residents find its official name redundant.

The Rising: An event that happened a century ago when the Great Old Ones rose. Reality was shattered, the laws of physics changed, and untold numbers of monsters unleashed upon the world. Even time no longer functions the same way. Some humans believe it was the apocalypse and all survivors are in Hell.

R'lyeh: A sunken pre-human city that was inhabited by Cthulhu and his ilk. Later worshiped as a holy place by the Deep Ones. It has since risen and flooded much of the Earth's coasts. It is now in the Dreamlands as it has survived the universe's destruction.

Serpent Men: A race of reptile-skinned humans who worship the god Set-Yig. Unlike Deep Ones or ghouls, they live among regular humans exclusively in disguise. There is a substantial population in the City.

Set-Yig: The god of the serpent men and a powerful god of ancient Stygia, worshiped by beings like Thoth-Amon.

Shoggoth: A protoplasmic shapeshifting blob species that is of incredible intelligence and power. They were created as slaves of the Elder Things and share a genetic basis with humanity that only fellow humanoids possess. Their abilities are very similar to Kastro'vaal in several aspects.

Shub-Niggurath: Great Old One. The Goat with a Thousand Young. A Harvest Goddess venerated by countless human civilizations under a variety of names. Many of its worshipers are ecstatic in nature and use her rights to engage in taboo sexual behavior.

Small Gods: The dream entities created from humanity's various religions. They are protected by Nyarlathotep and live in Kadath. They are known by the names of mortal gods and wield great power but cannot achieve as much as a true dreamer.

Sporemen: Humans infected by a horrific fungus that makes them part of a hive mind. They answer to the Great Old One Za'kul'dra-Zal, who is a servant of Hastur. Whole worlds have been destroyed by their kind throughout the universe.

Squad: A Ranger term used interchangeably with squadron due to New Arkham being a former Air Force base. It represents teams of 4, 6, and 8 to carry out missions despite traditional usage from previous times, representing the decay of the military.

Thule: A race of uplifted gorillas that were one of the early experiments of the Elder Things. The Thule possess psychic powers and vast knowledge of both sorcery as well as technology. Most of humanity is descended from them and they were rendered extinct by civil war as well as conflict with other species.

Tsathoggua: A furry toad Great Old One that lives underground. It is worshiped by the ghoul race as well the Faceless Ones.

Ulthar: One of the great Dreamlands nations, it is a city that has prospered and grown since Randolph Carter’s time but remains largely timeless. It is ruled by cats, but they allow the humans who care for them to remain ignorant of this fact.

Ultima Thule: The last of the Thule’s cities and their capital during the height of their empire. It was located in a pocket dimension within Africa that was destroyed by archaeologist Andrew Doran in order to stop an occult Nazi plot.

The Unimaginable Horror: A Great Old One that is related to the Colors as Cthulhu is to the Cthulhuoids. During its early trek across the universe, it wiped out the original Kastro’vaal race by removing them from time. It is an energy being that merged with Earth's oceans before its imprisonment by the wizard Zhaal. It was bound for another billion years in events peripherally involving John and Mercury as well as the Great Old One Cthulhu that is its enemy. It is also the name of a book of occult ramblings by Miskatonic scholar Thomas C. Phillips.

United States Remnant: The grandiose name for the New Arkham city-state and its colonies.

The Wasteland: The name for the vast lifeless desert that most of the world has been reduced to under the influence of the Great Old Ones.

White Gorilla: The nickname of Franz Jermyn, a half-Thule, half-human sorcerer.

Yellow King Studios: The film studios of Gabriel Booth that is known for producing most films in the City.

Yellow Sign: The mystical symbol of Hastur known to cause madness or inspiration.

Yog-Sothoth: The Key and the Gate. Yog-Sothoth is an omnipresent being that exists in all points of space and time continuously. One of the Outer

Gods, it has been summoned by many beings over the years and successfully doing so may have resulted in the current inside-out nature of reality. He destroyed the Old Universe.

Yith: See *Great Race of Yith*.

Zum-Trivalis: The Great Old One spoken of in the *Prophecies of the Rat God* and *De Vermis Mysteriis*. Zum-Trivalis is the Lord of Vermin and the titular Rat God. It is a psychic entity that manifests itself in hordes of insects and lesser animals. It is a greater servitor of Hastur and apparently the result of a planet sacrificing itself in a mass suicide to it. It is worshiped by the Faceless Ones and intelligent rats as well as some Mi-Go.

Zoog: A Dreamlands race that is the biological enemy of cats and was exterminated in the City by a conspiracy between the city's felines working with the Knights of Arkham. They appear as humanoid lemur, bat, and other things. It is difficult to say if they are naturally creatures of the Dreamlands or an alien race that immigrated to it. They prefer preying on young cats as well as infants or small humans.

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